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As we approach another calendar year of big gaming releases I tend to look ahead and see if any new trends or themes might be emerging. The last year has been a bit of a mixed one, but one big thing that was particularly good to see was the return of pure fun to the games industry.

I enjoy good stories and heavy themes in my games, of course, but sometimes you just want to shoot a demon in the face or run around a multiplayer arena with a bow and arrow, fighting someone in a mech suit. Sometimes it's nice to go outside and interact with other gamers, as *Pokémon Go* allowed us to do. Sometimes it feels good to completely immerse yourself in a new way of playing games, as we did with virtual reality. This was the joy of gaming unfiltered and it took until this year for it to occur to me what had been missing for a little while.

As I look ahead to next year I feel that there's a good mixture of fun and mature content. The arrival of the Switch will likely bring plenty of the former, while PS4's exclusive lineup alone will give us plenty of the latter. We might be a little light on new IPs for 2017, but we've got some cherished old friends returning such as *Mass Effect*, *God Of War* and maybe, just maybe, *Shenmue III*.

Once again, I feel that we can look ahead with optimism and while some of us may have felt burned by games we looked forward to in 2016, I hope that will only help us measure our excitement and make the games that really deliver all the more enjoyable as a result.

Jon Gordon

**Jonathan Gordon**
EDITOR




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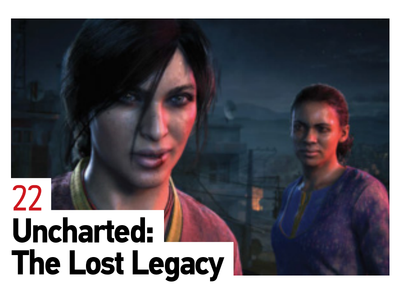
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## 2017 PREVIEW





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17 Feature

# 100 MOST WANTED FOR 2017

All the latest interviews, images and info on the biggest gaming releases for the next 12 months

# Discuss

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TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

# How will technology change gaming in 2017?

→ Every major console manufacturer will be peddling a new device in the new year, but how will that shape the future of the games industry?

Right Nintendo's Switch console is probably the big innovator for 2017 with its mix of home console comfort and mobile power. Is it enough to get the Big N back in the game?

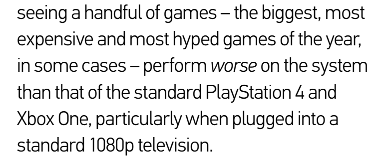



**If the release of PlayStation 4 Pro has proven anything, it's that perhaps we weren't quite ready.** Ready for the traditional generation-cycle to shatter, for 4K-enabled gaming or the apparent revolution that is HDR; we weren't prepared for the future, basically. And that isn't just 'we', the media, or you, the gamers, either, but those working behind the polygons and pixels too. The PS4 Pro is technically the most powerful home console on the market, but we're seeing a handful of games – the biggest, most expensive and most hyped games of the year, in some cases – perform *worse* on the system than that of the standard PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, particularly when plugged into a standard 1080p television.

> "The tech isn't there to support these new systems, and that makes the investment look a little less appealing by the day"

That isn't just disappointing, it's a disaster. Developers have clearly rushed to bring support to the PS4 Pro – designed to run games at a higher resolution, include enhanced graphical effects or push out improved framerates, regardless of the type of television set you own. With reports of small skeleton crews working behind the scenes to get PS4 Pro-patches ready, perhaps the problems we're hearing about and seeing aren't all that surprising.

Below We expect to see nothing but 4K and HDR announcements from Sony this year as it attempts to get a lead on Project Scorpio from Microsoft.



But for a company that has prided itself on being "for the players" for the better part of three years, seeing games on a more powerful system dropping frames and suffering tearing when compared to their standard brethren is troubling. It's also indicative of a modern trend of development, where companies such as Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo are so secretive of their hardware innovations, so withholding of critical information to the developers that need it the most, that it is ultimately the consumer that pays the price. And in 2017, if you want to be on the cutting edge of gaming, well, that price is likely to be fairly high.

There are a handful of notable hardware launches in 2017 that will shape the immediate future of the industry. Nintendo Switch is going to take triple-A experiences out of the living room and onto the streets, whereas Microsoft is still insistent that Project Scorpio will be the only place to enjoy truly native 4K gaming.

Meanwhile, Sony will be looking to hit the summer showcase season with an array of beautiful 4K (upscaled or otherwise) first-party exclusives – impossible to sell on the strength of their graphical fidelity due to the inherent limitations of live streaming – and PlayStation VR will be in desperate need of juicy games, lest the device risk going the way of the PlayStation Vita, Move or Eye, unsupported and unloved by the vast majority that ever dared pledge allegiance to one of Sony's numerous hardware gambles.

Right now, it looks as if it is Nintendo that has the best chance to come out of 2017 with its reputation in tact – and yes, that is even in spite of the Wii U's horror show of a run in this past generation. While it's largely true that graphics sell games, there's something simple and refreshing about Nintendo's approach to its new console. Switch is reportedly bringing some of the company's biggest franchises – *The Legend Of Zelda*, *3D Mario*, *Mario Kart* and *Splatoon* – to market in the launch window, in both home and handheld console variations with no loss in fidelity or functionality between the pair, such is the majesty of this new device. Coming in at an affordable price point (rumoured to be under £250), in offering multiplayer gaming as standard – without the need for extra peripherals – and in looking like a premium product that an actual adult might consider owning, the Nintendo Switch seems to have everything going for it. Except for the confidence of the consumer market, of course, though that's an entirely new (and somewhat unprecedented) problem for Nintendo's marketing team to overcome.

Sony and Microsoft, on the other hand, have other problems to deal with that aren't going to be simple to fix. The PS4 Pro and Project Scorpio are (or will be, in the latter's case) expensive, premium products aimed squarely at the hardcore crowd – a hangover of the appendage-measuring contest we've sat back and endured for three years, the culmination of the boredom-inducing 1080p/60fps argument. But that same hardcore crowd are also likely to be already in possession of one (if not both) of the less-powerful systems, they will need a reason to upgrade – sadly, such a reason doesn't exist in game form at present. Both will be looking

DATA STREAM → TUMBLR HAS REVEALED THAT UNDERTALE IS ITS MOST TALKED ABOUT GAME IN 2016




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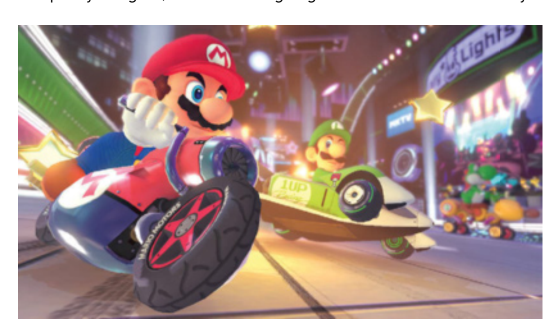


to deliver the killer app that makes this new resolution feel as special as it looks.

These systems require 4K-ready, HDR-enabled TV sets, right? Here's something Sony and Microsoft don't want you to know: it's very easy to buy a 4KTV that doesn't give you what you were expecting, in fact, it's very, very easy to buy a TV that will actively make your games look *worse*. Consoles have jumped the gun, the tech isn't there to support these new systems, and that makes the investment look a little less appealing by the day.

In many ways, the tech that's going to shape gaming in 2017 is largely dependent on television manufacturers. The beginning of January will bring trade show CES 2017 and every gamer interested in sitting on the forefront of the industry should be watching with baited breath and money grasped tightly in their hands. This is where manufacturers will announce the new sets, but whether any of them are able to confidently display 1080p content (without making it look worse), push 4K quality images (without viewing angles destroying the picture), provide actual HDR support (without inducing debilitating input lag and image bleed), and do it all at a price point under £1,000 will likely make or break the PS4 Pro and Project Scorpio.

2017 is going to be an interesting year for our industry. We are seeing stunning games on the horizon, the future looks bright for virtual reality and Nintendo is pushing conventional hardware in an unconventional direction. Whether the two market leaders' insistence on pushing towards a 4K-enabled future proves to be successful or ultimately disruptive is something to consider and discuss all the same. Do graphics really sell games, or is it what's underneath that truly matters to the consumer? In an era of game design where storytelling, writing and motion capture is on the precipice of taking a huge leap forward, you'd expect it to be the latter. Though 2017 will be largely telling on that front, of what consumers really want, and it will send shockwaves through the entire industry.

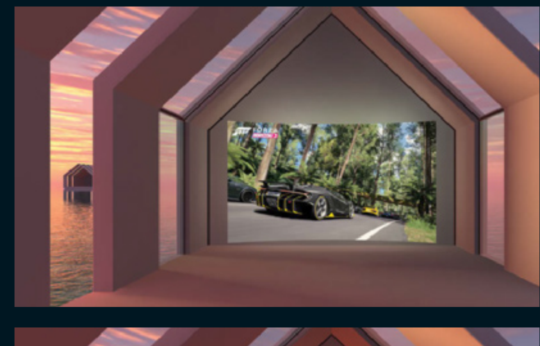


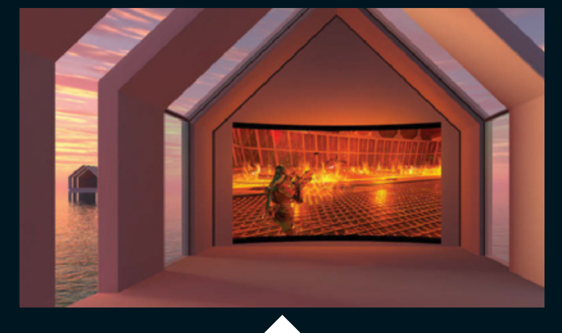
## XBOX VR

→ Microsoft to continue its cautious relationship with VR

**One of the bigger surprises of 2016 was to see Microsoft act so apprehensively in the face of virtual reality. The company has been flirting with the tech for over 18 months now, but we still know very little about its plans to integrate it with the Xbox brand, nor whether it will act on a proprietary or third-party device. Still, it has shown resilience in supporting Oculus and it's looking clearer by the month that the Rift will be the compatible device of choice when it comes to Project Scorpio in 2017.**

**In fact, you can get a taste of the collaboration already, as Microsoft finally integrates Rift into the Xbox One by way of a free update. Essentially, should you have a Windows 10 PC, an Xbox One and an Oculus Rift, you can sync everything together and begin displaying your games on a huge virtual display inside the headset. This is, quite obviously, the first steps towards something greater, but it's looking clear that the Xbox and Oculus partnership is going to continue long into 2017.**









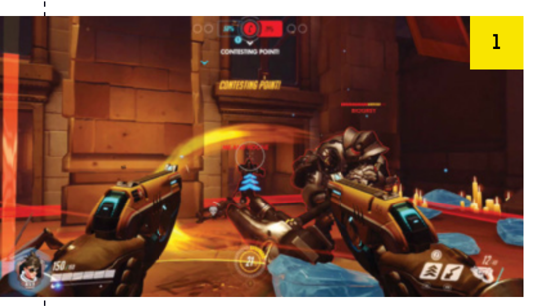


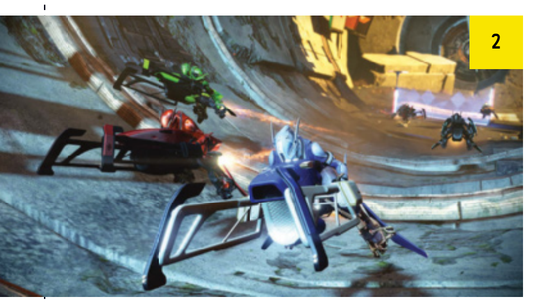

POST LIFE

# The games that refuse to die

→ These are the games that you'll be spending your time playing in 2017. Thankfully, there's a good chance that you already own quite a few of them. Games are evolving into live services, ensuring play continues long after you're initially done with them

**This console generation has pushed through one the largest shifts in triple-A gaming history that we have ever seen.** Studios are attempting to combat spiralling budgets and development pipeline times with the concept of 'games as a live service', wherein a videogame's initial release is just the beginning of something much greater – its true potential lying on the distant horizon after it goes 'live'. It's an idea that PC players have long enjoyed through the persistent evolution of MOBAs, such as *League Of Legends* and *DOTA2*, not to mention MMOs like *World Of Warcraft*; as such, many of the biggest releases of 2017 aren't new releases at all, but older titles still vying for your time and attention with new content, updated mechanics and refreshed game systems. These are the ones worth paying attention to.


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**Inset** Ubisoft has continued to support *The Division* with new missions and content and while it's not as successful as some others in retaining players, the quality has been high.

## Overwatch

1 **Blizzard is the king of games as a service, perfecting the consistent roll out of new content through the likes of *Hearthstone*, *Diablo*, *StarCraft* and *World Of Warcraft*.** It's no surprise then that *Overwatch* is leading the charge on console, with the hero shooter set to push through 2017 with a constant stream of new maps, heroes and content to keep you engaged while the hype machine trundles on elsewhere. Blizzard's big focus for 2017 is on competitive and arena play. If you've any aspirations for going pro, the *Overwatch* World League will be the big point of interest in the coming months, though casual fans should find that a refreshed Arena mode continues to bring new and interesting game modes to the fray to keep those tight battles fresh throughout the year.

## Destiny

2 ***Destiny* has struggled to settle into a satisfying rhythm since its launch back in 2014, though developer Bungie is finally starting to get a handle on it following the *Rise Of Iron* expansion, which was released in September 2016.** While many fans await the launch of *Destiny 2* – rumoured to be revealed as part of Sony's E3 2017 press conference – the rest will hopefully be content with the arrival of smaller, more intimate updates. Following the Dawning Winter Event, which ushers in a second year of the Sparrow Racing League, the SRL will be available for the foreseeable future in private matches to ensure you are still able to chip away at the exotic Thunderlord weapon quests in anticipation of a spring content drop.

## The Division

3 **By all accounts, *The Division* was a huge success.** Thought to be Ubisoft's best-selling game ever, it should come as no surprise that the publisher is eager to keep millions of players running around the abandoned city streets of Manhattan. Co-developers Massive Entertainment and Reflections: A Ubisoft Studio are hard at work, not only with DLC packs but large updates that improve the core game experience. 2017 is set to bring game update 1.5, which promises even more stabilisation and quality of life additions based on player feedback, as well as the final piece of expansion content, *Last Stand*. By all accounts, *The Division* shows no signs of slowing down and *Last Stand* will simply be the next piece of the puzzle as Ubisoft prepares the inevitable sequel.

DATA STREAM → NINTENDO IS OFFERING A $20,000 REWARD FOR ANYONE WHO CAN HACK THE 3DS



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## No Man's Sky

4 **One of the most divisive games ever made?** It's a bold claim, but judging by the backlash it might not be all that outlandish. Hello Games had been silent since the launch of *No Man's Sky* and while the vocal minority took this as an opportunity to highlight how the studio was avoiding accountability, it was actually hard at work on the first major content drop. The free Foundation update was huge and suitably stunning, not only introducing base-building and new game modes, but also bringing a swath of tweaks and fixes to elements of the wider experience. It was impressive, to say the least, and a sign of things to come. It's a Foundation for Hello Games to build upon in 2017; *No Man's Sky* was always designed to evolve over time and the studio just planted the first seeds of its growth.

## Rainbow Six Siege

5 **For many FPS fans, *Rainbow Six Siege* wasn't just a solid release but the greatest tactical FPS this side of *Counter-Strike*.** It's a bold claim, but it is also difficult to argue with; *Siege* has been a constant delight since its launch last year, helped in no small part by Ubisoft's insistence on supporting the game with regular content updates and DLC. The publisher has revealed that a second year of content is coming, with four new maps and eight new Operators (from brand new CTUs) planned to roll out across 2017. Year 2 will be split into four seasons, with one map and two Operators coming in each alongside new primary and secondary weapons, new cosmetic items and a suite of features and improvements, *Siege* isn't going away anytime soon.

## Paragon

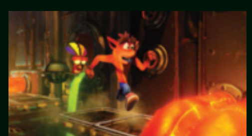
6 **It feels as if *Paragon* has been out for an age.** In truth, Epic Games has just been slowly rolling out more content to the public since its unveiling in November 2015. The studio's free-to-play MOBA for PS4 and PC has been through multiple open beta cycles already, though this looks to continue for the foreseeable future – basically, expect to see *Paragon* stick around for a long ol' while. Mechanically solid, intuitive map design and cross-platform support provide a solid foundation for play, while the near-constant roll out of new characters and map updates have ensured *Paragon* is one of the better MOBAs to ever find its way onto console. The meta is only just being established, meaning there is plenty of scope for massive expansion in the coming months. 

**GAMES RELEASED IN 2016 MAKE UP 40 PER CENT OF THE STEAM STORE ACCORDING TO STEAM SPY**

OLD SCHOOL COOL

# Sony reveals its retro love for 2017

→ Among all the big PlayStation announcements, here's some classic gaming resurrections you might have missed



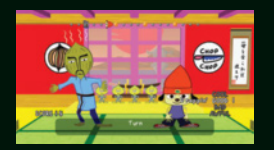
## CRASH BANDICOOT N. SANE TRILOGY

1 In case you were concerned that the only taste of Crash you were going to get in the near future was playing *Skylanders Imaginators* or replaying those bonus levels in *Uncharted 4*, the news that the original trilogy of games from the early PlayStation era are being remastered should come as a mighty relief. And wow, these remasters look very nicely done. All of the art, textures and models have been remade for the current generation, the lighting looks great and the games seem to be running smoother than ever.



## WIPEOUT OMEGA COLLECTION

2 Does it count as retro when the games were only launched in the last eight years? Probably not, but *WipEout* is such a classic PlayStation brand and *HD*, *HD Fury* and *2048* are such wonderful throwbacks to the original games that they feel pretty retro. With their insane levels of speed, curvy tracks, intense racing and pumping soundtracks, the *WipEout* games have held a special place in our hearts for many years. Getting to see them with a fresh lick of paint and given new life in 4K resolution is something too good to pass up.



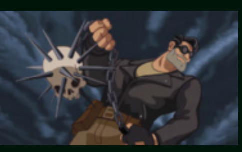
## PARAPPA THE RAPPER REMASTERED

3 Speaking of 4K resolution, did you ever imagine that, of all of the games released exclusively on the original PlayStation, *PaRappa The Rapper* would get upgraded to work on gigantic and crisp-looking screens? We definitely did not, but once again this is shaping up to be an impressive upgrade of a beloved rhythm action game. It was one of the great innovators of the era, taking full advantage of the new CD format for its music tracks. The style has aged pretty well really given the paper-thin look of its character's models too.



## WINDJAMMERS

4 This resurrection of one of the great arcade sports games of the Neo Geo era was not on most people's radars (including our own admittedly), but it's a classic and it's a labour of love for DotEmu. The development team loved the game and wanted to bring it back, in much the way the DotEmu has adapted titles like *Another World* and *Little Big Adventure* for modern machines. If you're not familiar, *Windjammers* is a mix of volleyball and tennis by way of ultimate frisbee and air hockey, and it's an absolute blast to play. If you missed it in 1994 then now's your chance.



## FULL THROTTLE REMASTERED

5 Following hot on the heels of *Day Of The Tentacle* and *Grim Fandango*, both of which have received critically acclaimed and enjoyable remasters in recent years, Double Fine has turned its attention to another classic adventure game from the mind of Tim Schafer. *Full Throttle Remastered* is looking just as good as the other remastered titles that this team has turned its hand to over the years with overhauled assets, newly animated cut-scenes and more. The love and attention that goes into these things is something to behold.

DATA STREAM → PS4 SHOOTER HIT RESOGUN WILL BE GETTING A 4K AND HDR PATCH FOR PS4 PRO



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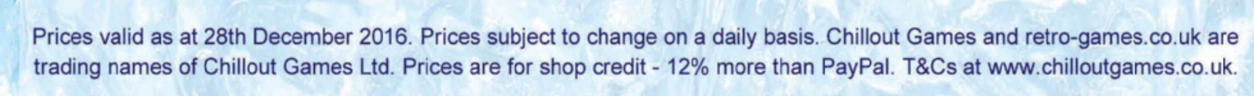



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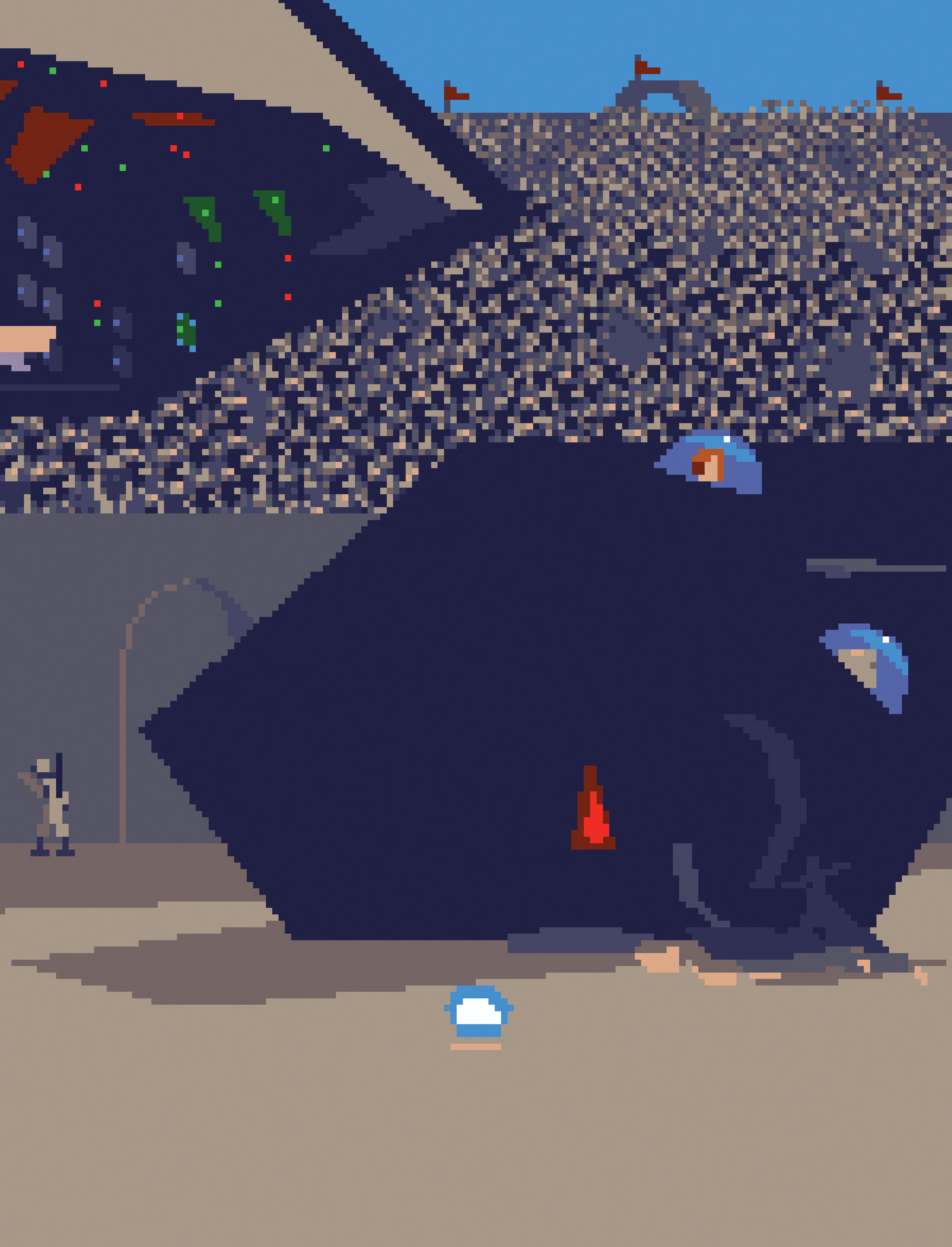

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WHY I ❤...

## ANOTHER WORLD

GOICHI SUDA, CEO OF GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

*I absolutely love Zelda, I love all of them; but that's as a gamer. But there's a game called Another World. What valuable lesson that game taught me was that there is no set rule, necessarily, to game design.*

*At the beginning of the game, if the player doesn't do anything, they just sink and die. In a way, you could say that the game is immediately challenging the player. At the beginning, it teaches you that if you aren't paying attention – if you aren't being careful – you will die. And this was before the Internet; you had to figure it all out by yourself... the way I approached it then, was that I'm not going to lose here, I'm going to rise to a challenge and beat this game. At the time I just thought, wow, I have encountered an amazing game.*

"It teaches you that if you aren't paying attention – if you aren't being careful – you will die"

GOICHI SUDA, CEO OF GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

Future

# First Games Announced!

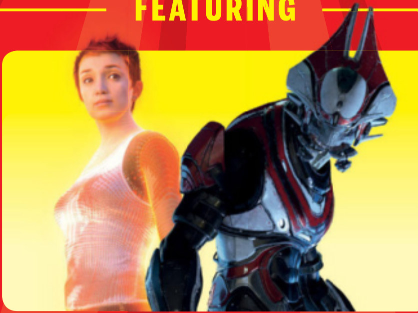



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# MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA IS WORLDS APART FROM THE COMPETITION

## BIOWARE'S LATEST RPG IS LOOKING TO SET A NEW BAR FOR THE GENRE

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** CANADA **RELEASE:** MARCH 2017
**PUBLISHER:** EA **DEVELOPER:** BIOWARE **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC

There's risk and reward to be found in a clean slate. On the one hand you can begin again, head down some paths that might have been closed off to you before, take a few risks that might have felt more dangerous in the past and journey forward with a little less baggage. On the other hand you have less to ground you, more work to do to meet your previous achievements and often more scrutiny to deal with. So, while *Mass Effect Andromeda* might be setting itself up in a new galaxy in order to reset the clock, there's no shortage of challenge ahead for BioWare.

But the Montreal team appears to be more than up for that. After almost a decade, the team is made up as much by veterans of the series as it is by people who got into working at BioWare because they were fans of Commander Shepard's adventures. It's perhaps because of those fan-employees that *Andromeda* carries a sense of wide-eyed wonder and a fresh take on well-established ideas. There's a changing of the guard happening at this massive studio and this game is the first evidence of the transition.

So, what is *Mass Effect Andromeda* doing to reset the clock on the series? First, it appears to be pulling together a greatest hits of concepts from its back catalogue with a depth of narrative and world exploration closer to the original *Mass Effect*, but with the smooth action chops of *ME3*. But there's also a distinct hint of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* to be found here too. The team's approach for that sequel was to put you in the shoes of a relative novice to the world and its demands, challenge you with morally grey decisions to make and pack out your team with diverse personalities whose relationship to you was a little more complex than love and hate.

We're seeing a lot of those elements in *Andromeda* now, too, not least in the role you'll be occupying as one of the Ryder twins, Scott and Sara. Both are commissioned to the Andromeda Initiative, but are not highly-trained operatives like their father Alec Ryder, an N7 classified member of the Alliance military just as Commander Shepard was at the beginning of *Mass Effect*. During the course of the game (we're assuming rather early on) something is going to mean your father passing on the title of Pathfinder (essentially mission leader for the Earth ark Hyperion in this new galaxy) to you as one of his children. That means that, while your character has something of a predetermined past (and name), they're young enough and inexperienced enough for you to make them whatever you want. Whether you play as Sara or Scott, there are no specific classes that you need to preselect at the start of the game. You can pursue biotic and tech abilities as you see fit, specialising in whatever weaponry you care to take on.

Ultimately, though, you will be given the opportunity to specialise in a certain skill if you reach a high level with it, not unlike the training specialisations in *Inquisition* where tutors would offer you expertise in a certain discipline of your class for additional special abilities. At this end point you might end up with something closer to the original trilogy's class system, but it's still much more fluid in approach and execution.

Likewise, you won't be experiencing the classic Renegade and Paragon choice options of the original trilogy, but rather a more nuanced and sometimes grey selection of actions and responses in conversation – again perhaps »

■ This scanning mechanic reminds us a lot of similar tools in *Metroid Prime* or detective vision in the *Batman Arkham* titles. Side missions involving criminal investigations appear to have a role to play through *Andromeda*, so that's something to look forward to.



The move to the Frostbite engine for *Mass Effect Andromeda* means that the game has a slightly different look and feel from what you might remember. The character modeling is certainly more realistic and individualistic than the Unreal rigs of the past.

# HUMANITY'S MASS EFFECT TIMELINE

## 2148
Humanity discovers a cache of Prothean technology deep under the surface of Mars leading to understanding of mass effect fields and the development of faster than light travel for further exploration of the solar system.

## 2149
A mass relay is discovered orbiting Pluto and a team is assembled – lead by Jon Grissom – to be the first to use it. They travel 26 light years to Arcturus where they find that the mass relays are a part of a massive network for travel around the Milky Way. The Systems Alliance charter is signed by the 18 largest nations of Earth, forming the military and exploratory might of the Alliance.

## 2150
Surveys begin for potential habitable planets outside of the solar system for human colonisation.

## 2151
An accident in Singapore exposes hundreds to Element Zero dust leading to many children born with cancer. Kaidan Alenko's mother is among those exposed.

## 2154
Shepard is born.

## 2157
First contact with an alien race for humanity leads to a violent conflict with the Turians after they witness the Alliance attempting to activate a dormant mass relay, a practice forbidden by galactic council law. Well-funded human survivalist group Cerberus is formed.

## 2158
Humanity comes to understand the nature of biotics and begins its search for Element Zero exposed children.

## 2172
Shepard joins the Alliance military.

## 2176
The Andromeda Initiative is created through private funding with the intention of reaching and exploring the Andromeda Galaxy through a multi-species cooperative effort.

## 2183
Humanity and the Turians join forces to work on an experimental frigate to be named the SSV Normandy, captained by David Anderson with Commander Shepard as executive officer. The events of *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* are set in motion.

## 2184
The Andromeda Initiative begins the process of briefing candidates for the mission.

## 2185
Commander Shepard is revived by Cerberus and the events of *Mass Effect 2* continue. The Andromeda Initiative arks launch, beginning their 600 year journey towards the Andromeda Galaxy.

## 2186
The Reapers attack Earth, the events of *Mass Effect 3* begin.

# 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE REAL ANDROMEDA

University of California Santa Cruz's professor of Astronomy and Astrophysics, Raja GuhaThakurta, gives us the real info on the galaxy far, far away

## A QUESTION OF DISTANCE

1 The Andromeda galaxy, if you were travelling at the speed of light, takes about 2.5 million years to get [to]. Which is fine, that's not incompatible with the game, you just have to arrange it so that it can be done. The game doesn't have to be 100 per cent realistic. You do want to articulate just how much faster than the speed of light you would have to travel in order to get there in 600 years.

## THE SCALE OF ANDROMEDA

2 The Andromeda galaxy itself is quite big. The bright part of the Andromeda galaxy, which is shaped like a disc – like a Frisbee – is about 60,000 light years in radius. There is a much sparser halo of stars around Andromeda that's much bigger. That one has a radius close to 250,000 light years.

## GALACTIC CANNIBALISM

3 It's looking more and more clear that that Andromeda galaxy has had a somewhat more violent history [than the Milky Way]. Violent in the context of a phenomenon called galactic cannibalism where galaxies grow at the expense of swallowing smaller galaxies. When this happens the existing big galaxy swallows the smaller galaxy, the smaller galaxy does some damage, disturbing the configuration of stars in the bigger galaxy. It looks like these cannibalism events have been bigger and more recent in Andromeda than in the Milky Way.

## HOW WE MEASURE ANDROMEDA

4 We can measure distances of things in Andromeda – we can measure the chemical composition of stars in Andromeda, remarkable though that sounds. You can literally take the light of individual stars, spread them out into the colours of the rainbow, much more finely than a typical rainbow, into thousands of colours and from that you can measure the doppler shift of the star; how fast it's moving towards or away from us. You can use the spectrum to measure how strong the dips in the star are due to different elements in the atmosphere of the stars. The deeper the dips the more of that element it contains, so we can measure calcium, magnesium and iron in the atmosphere of the stars in Andromeda.

## PLANET-BEARING STARS AND LIFE-BEARING PLANETS

5 Planet-bearing stars is easy to imagine, because we now know not just about the eight planets in the solar system but of thousands of planets. We understand our solar system and we understand a broad spectrum of planetary systems in the context of our system. Life is a much more difficult question because we only know about life here on earth and we don't completely understand it in context. By that I mean we don't understand the full diversity of lifeforms in the universe. The basic question that comes to mind, 'would we recognise all forms of life even if they were standing in front of us or presenting life to us?' That's an open question. I don't know if we would.



■ The star map returns but is now accessible from the bridge right alongside your pilot rather than stationed further back in the ship. It's worth noting that the Tempest is a good deal smaller than the Normandy, but appears to be of similar design.





■ The various settlers from the Nexus and other arks appear to have gone their separate ways or fallen out with the mission leadership, setting up their own bases and renegade groups that you'll likely have to confront throughout the game.




Combat is looking a lot more franctic and fluid than the past from what we've seen, but a menu wheel of abilities and weapons is still in play. It will still be up to you how you want to approach confrontations and squad orders.

influenced by the approach in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. As an extension of this, relationships will be a little more naturalistic and dependent on the personalities of the people you talk to, so romances in the game become a little more complex (or perhaps simpler if the target of your affection is quick to respond). That said, interruptions will return during conversations, allowing you to break the flow of the scene with a physical action (such as punching a reporter in the face, as was the case previously).

That freedom also applies to BioWare's approach to side missions and your main quest, where the team doesn't want you to feel that passing by opportunities or focusing in on only a couple of side characters is going to negatively affect your progress through the game. So, while loyalty missions return for *Andromeda*, they are not going to be necessary in order to succeed in your primary quest line. Instead the studio is using these side missions as good excuses to play around with gameplay and offer more dedicated insight into your companions. It's a very smart idea, really, and one that *Mass Effect 2* touched on but didn't necessarily fully explore. If BioWare can guarantee at least one squad member is fixed to be in your team for a side quest it has a lot more room to write dialogue and play with mechanics around that character than in the open world where you could be working with any combination of team members. The Stealing Memory mission for Kasumi in *ME2* is a pretty good example of this line of thinking, sending Shepard on a Bond-esque espionage caper. If that's the degree of gameplay twist we can expect throughout *Andromeda* then we're definitely onboard for this approach.

We know of four confirmed squadmates so far. The first is Liam, a human male colleague aboard the Hyperion (humanity's ark to Andromeda) with a background in law enforcement, who acts as chief of security. He's been described as an enthusiastic member of the crew, full of energy and humour, but also quick to anger. The other companion we know about – who many fans fell in love with before we even knew her name – is Peebee, an Asari who travelled aboard the mission command ship named Nexus. The reason why she's not with the other Asari is that she's described as a bit of a lone wolf, albeit with an adventurous spirit. She's fast-talking, incredibly smart and very blunt. We think we're going to get along famously. And then there's the slightly more mysterious Vetra (a female turian) and Drack (a male krogan) revealed in the most recent gameplay, but little is known about their backstory at present.

However, we do know that there are five ships in the fleet sent to Andromeda, four of which are largely operated and occupied by a single Citadel race. 20,000 representatives of humanity are stationed on the SSV Hyperion as well as on the command ship Nexus, lead by the human project founder Jien Garson. Each ark has its own assigned Pathfinder, like Alex Ryder, so there's a chance you might meet the others. The other three arks are believed to be run by the Asari, Turians and the Salarians, being the primary members of the Citadel council, so team members from these races seem likely and have been spotted already. We would be surprised if someone from the local systems didn't cross your path at some point as it would be interesting to have an Andromedan native join the mission.

So far the only confirmed native race in *Andromeda* is the Kett (besides some generic wildlife) and they'll be acting as your primary antagonists through the game. They're a militaristic people who don't take kindly to tens of thousands of aliens from another galaxy arriving in their backyard. BioWare wanted to imbue them with a very different look while still being able to work comfortably within the Frostbite engine, so while the Kett are bipedal just like the majority of races from our own galaxy in the game, they have prominent skeletal shielding on their bodies and a more intricate, organic look to their tech and weaponry. And as with all the great BioWare villains, they're maybe not as straightforwardly bad as they might first appear. You are, after all, the invaders in this scenario, so they have good reason to be concerned.

Other races seem highly likely, however, so it will be interesting to see what else – besides giant sand worms and mechanical monsters – makes an appearance. We're likely to see a contrast between the Milky Way's sleek and stylish design (helped along in this game by vehicle designer Daniel Simon who also worked on *Tron Legacy* and *Oblivion* to great success) and a more naturalistic and sometimes rough look of the indigenous species. But for all the contrasts there might be visually, the theme of subtlety and nuance is likely to permeate everything. By the end of *Andromeda* we wouldn't be surprised to find that the citizens of the Milky Way had more in common with Andromadeans than they could have imagined.



Much like *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, conversations are now a lot more about tone and intention than they are about picking the good and evil path. You're free to make your Ryder whoever you want them to be through the game.

# HOW THE LOST LEGACY TAKES NAUGHTY DOG INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

## DRAKE STEPS ASIDE SO THAT NEW STORIES MIGHT BE TOLD

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** US **RELEASE:** Q3 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1
**PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** NAUGHTY DOG

We knew. From the moment the footage started rolling at the beginning of the PSX conference, we knew we were looking at a new Naughty Dog project. Granted, we didn't know *what* we were seeing at first – there was some suspicion that it could have been the heavily rumoured *The Last Of Us: Part II* (which Sony instead chose to close the show with) as the setting and the way events played out was not dissimilar to the opening of the original. But from the superb character models and exceptional animation to camera work, attention to detail and perfect interactions between characters, this glossy new trailer had Naughty Dog's unmistakable fingerprints all over it.

And soon enough, all became clear – the rooftop reveal of Nadine being the contact and Chloe being the disguised protagonist got the pop it deserved as the entire Anaheim convention centre hall erupted at the revelation of this being a new *Uncharted* game. Yes, game – while *Lost Legacy* apparently started as a DLC story for *Uncharted 4*, it has grown and evolved over the course of development and is now planned as a standalone release, not unlike *inFamous: First Light*. Naughty Dog claims its length will fall somewhere between *The Last Of Us' Left Behind* add-on and the main *Uncharted 4* campaign – a fairly large window, but one that at least guarantees a decent play time for this new chapter.

This was always going to be the most logical way of continuing the *Uncharted* franchise – Drake's story may be done outside of prequels and flashbacks (and we've had quite enough of the latter already, thanks) but there are still plenty of loose ends to be tied up and tales to be told when it comes to the rest of *Uncharted*'s superb cast of heroes and villains. The final few chapters of *A Thief's End* hinted at two possible directions that said spin-offs could easily go, but it's great to see Naughty Dog putting a little more thought into which areas and characters would be best served by more spotlight time – Sam is a bit of a one-note character, going back to a younger Sully would just be like having a re-skinned Drake go to different places and the other option (which we'll say nothing more on than if you finished *Uncharted 4*, you'll know what we mean) feels more like a way to progress the series proper than to provide further reading around what's already out there. As such, the unlikely pairing of Chloe and Nadine is a great choice, as they're both morally grey characters whose true intentions and backgrounds would benefit from further investigation.

Details are fairly scant at this point, although we do know that it'll be set in and around a war-ravaged India shortly after the events of *Uncharted 4*, with Shoreline having disbanded and Nadine becoming a free agent. Thematically and mechanically, *Lost Legacy* will apparently be more in line with *A Thief's End* than earlier titles, with more grounded, realistic subject matter (read: no supernatural nonsense), plus improved and expanded versions of things like contextual melee attacks, environmental takedowns and even larger mini sandboxes in which to stalk and/or evade hostiles. The slower pace of the demo section – which is apparently the very start of the game, presumably after a little preamble as there won't need to be such secrecy surrounding Chloe's identity any more – is also in keeping with *Uncharted 4*'s more considered and varied pace. That said, it's an *Uncharted* game, so expect slower moments to be offset by the usual variety of incredible explosive set-pieces. The return of vehicles seems to be a given, too, especially since Naughty Dog has been eager to reiterate Chloe's status as 'the best driver in the business'.

The industry can always use more strong female leads so it's great to see Naughty Dog doubling down on this, especially seeing as the *Uncharted* franchise is the one that gave us PlayStation's leading man – benching him after the fourth game was a bold move but this unexpected partnership is bolder still. Fingers crossed the risk pays off, but it's worth remembering that there are few safer pairs of paws in the business than those of Naughty Dog.

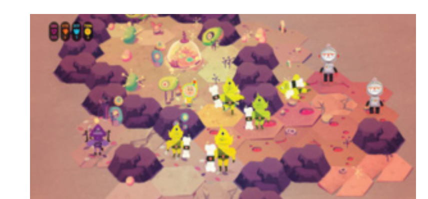
Environmental detail, lighting, incredible character models… yep, this is an *Uncharted* game alright. We don't even need to tell you that any more, such is Naughty Dog's unparalleled affinity for world-building.



Still on the fence about whether to upgrade to a PS4 Pro? No studio is going to be able to twist your arm quite as well as Naughty Dog can…

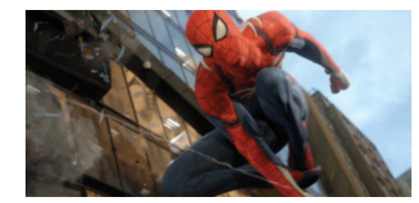
## IS NAUGHTY DOG BITING OFF MORE THAN IT CAN CHEW?

Our main concern after the PSX showcase was the sheer amount of work Naughty Dog – a studio famed for its dedication to perfection – has made for itself by working on this ambitious story expansion (which goes far beyond the remit of the original *Uncharted 4* story DLC) alongside the newly announced *The Last Of Us: Part II*. The implication was that the sequel was shown off early and that *Uncharted*'s next chapter will be the main focus but, even so, it's slightly troubling to think about time and assets being split between the two projects, especially in the wake of news that *The Last Of Us* co-director Bruce Straley has taken a sabbatical and won't be involved in either project.



## LOOT RASCALS

This multiplayer roguelike mixes survival gameplay with card trading and that old classic, cooperative or competitive multiplayer that is dictated only by your behaviour to others. You can grab it on PC already, but PS4 is getting this fun-looking game early in the New Year.



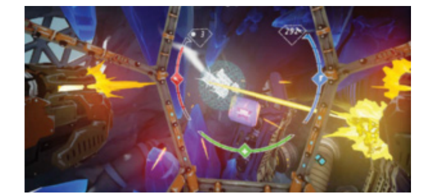
## SPIDER-MAN

The little glimpses we keep getting of Insomniac's *Spider-Man* only make us more and more excited. Sure, we've been burned by licensed titles in the past, but since this looks to be a standalone Spidey outing the time-sensitive pressure is off.



## LITTLE NIGHTMARES

This gorgeous-looking puzzle platformer has a wonderful art style and some great character design. Our hands-on time has shown that it handles very nicely; not dissimilar to *LittleBigPlanet*, but a tad tighter. Now we just need to see how the puzzle gameplay holds up.



## STARBLOOD ARENA

PlayStation VR had a great launch lineup and some good support in the weeks that followed, but things were starting to look a little sparse going into early 2017. This FPS from Whitemoon Dreams has some of the feel of *RIGS* but mixed with the style of *Borderlands*.



## FROZEN SYNAPSE 2

This sequel to the highly acclaimed strategy game looks bigger and bolder than before with its procedurally generated cities and the ability to infiltrate any building with any scheme you can devise. It's a brilliantly cerebral and engaging style of play.










**NEED TO KNOW**

SLOCLAP'S CORE TEAM OF DESIGNERS, PROGRAMMERS AND ARTISTS ALL MET WHILE AT UBISOFT WORKING ON THE LIKES OF *GHOST RECON* AND *WATCH DOGS*, BEFORE LEAVING IN 2015 TO BEGIN PRODUCTION ON *ABSOLVER*.







# LEARN THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR WITH ABSOLVER

## JADE EMPIRE MEETS JOURNEY IN THIS FREE-FLOWING MARTIAL ARTS GAME

**FORMAT:** PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** FRANCE **PUBLISHER:** DEVOLVER DIGITAL **DEVELOPER:** SLOCLAP **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-6

### 1 CHANNEL YOUR FLOW

*Absolver* is, at its heart, purely ritualistic. Tunics flow freely in the wind as warriors circle one another, each feinting cautiously in search of an opening. The first salvo of strikes comes slowly, tentatively, the desire for victory balanced by a respect for the mystic magic behind the martial arts. The pair are engaged in fluid hand-to-hand combat, switching between stances, issuing attacks and parries with rhythmic precision. As one eventually concedes victory with a bent knee, the other offers a helping hand. Lessons have been learnt and new skills acquired – a friendship formed in the trials of combat.

### 2 DANCING UNDER DURESS

Built around hand-to-hand combat, developer Sloclap is putting an emphasis on dancing while under duress, where grace and fluid movement is as important as understanding each of your four tactical stances. Movement is as much of a weapon as your fists in *Absolver*, where your ability to explore and survive the world of Adal will lean on your senses as much as it does your ability to launch a devastating flow of attacks, dodges, feints and counters. New weapons and combat styles are learnt from other players along the way, though there's nothing quite as integral to survival as your sense of anticipation.

### 3 PATH OF THE WARRIOR

In *Absolver* you are tasked with following the path of the warrior. You'll begin your adventure as a lowly Prospect, destined to wander painterly forsaken lands to hone your abilities. Learn your craft well and eventually you'll be able to graduate into the ranks of the Absolvers – elite combatants attempting to maintain stability for a world in ruin. On your travels you'll come across other Prospects and Absolvers, with the option to team up for PvE dungeons for rare loot and equipment, or to test your skill in dedicated PvP combat arenas for progression through the ranks; an ever present option.

### 4 MARTIAL ARTS MASTERY

*Absolver* is built around seamless multiplayer, allowing you to generate unique stories through player interaction – every time you come across another player is a moment filled with tension and terror, as you'll never quite know whether they are eager to trade, befriend or battle you. Trust, it seems, is a total leap of faith in *Absolver*; any friend can become a foe, though any foe could also become a much-needed mentor. *Absolver* lets you customise every aspect of the gameplay, meaning every player you come across will present an entirely unique challenge to try and overcome.

### 5 CUSTOMISE YOUR STYLE

As you eventually learn various new combat styles and attacks, acquire different weapons, powers and armour sets, you'll have the opportunity to start building your style. You'll be able to essentially build your own playstyle ahead of venturing back out into the world with other players, even going as far as to arranging attacks in a combat deck to design your own unique attack pattern and flow. It's a simple system and ultimately lets you create your own combos which, again, only helps to bring an extra edge of tension to every player encounter online.


Senua's struggle is a deeply personal one in a harsh and dangerous landscape, but given her mental health you may need to question just how real everything you're seeing and hearing really is.





# HOW HELLBLADE IS REDEFINING INDIE AMBITION

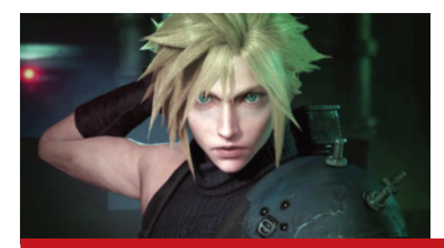
## HAND-CRAFTED, GORGEOUS AND LIKE NOTHING ELSE YOU'LL EVER PLAY

**FORMAT:** PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** UK **PUBLISHER:** NINJA THEORY **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

Ninja Theory has been thoroughly transparent about its development process with each passing developer diary for *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, revealing fascinating new approaches to game design. Perhaps most impressive of all is the team's commitment to portraying every theme it wants to touch upon in the game with as much real-world knowledge as it can manage.

We've seen this already in the game's combat, which places Senua as a fast, agile and technically gifted sword fighter against much stronger Viking warriors. While compromises have been made to suit camera positioning, the attacks and animations of combat are not only influenced by real techniques, but recorded and then augmented using cutting-edge motion capture technology.

But it goes further than that, as we've recently seen with Ninja Theory's approach to 3D audio to portray the experience of hearing voices – or auditory hallucination – a symptom of Senua's mental illness in the game. Using theatre performers recording audio on 3D microphones, struggling, whispering, directing themselves to Senua and sometimes just talking among themselves, the experience was inspired by conversations with people who deal with the condition every day or are recovering from mental health issues. You can get a taste of what it will sound like by checking out some of Ninja Theory's developer diary videos, but already we can tell *Hellblade* is going to be a game that is best experienced with a headset. It's this level of attention to detail that continues to excite us about this game. Hopefully we'll be seeing much more of it soon.

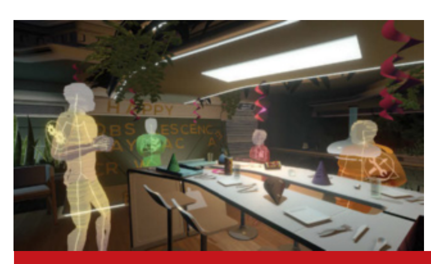


# FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

## ONCE MORE WITH EPISODIC FEELING

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PLAYERS:** 1
**DEVELOPER:** SQUARE ENIX BUSINESS DIVISION 1
**PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

Was this the *Final Fantasy VII* return that we really wanted? We're not sure, but then we've had the chance to play the PlayStation original in so many different variations over the years, perhaps a new take on the experience should be welcome. *Remake* is not a traditional remaster or recreation of Square's seminal RPG title, but rather an entirely new telling and presentation of the classic story. With an episodic release, combat more akin to *Dissidia Final Fantasy* and completely redesigned visuals, *FFVII Remake* is wildly innovative. And given how successful Square Enix has seen *Hitman* be in a similar format, we'd suggest that it might actually work really well.



# TACOMA

## PLAYING WITH TIME IN SPACE

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** USA
**DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PUBLISHER:** FULLBRIGHT
**RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

Like walking through a live performance of a story, but one where you can rewind and playback the conversations happening around you, *Tacoma* is hoping to do for time manipulation in storytelling what *Gone Home* achieved for environmental exploration. How this plays out in the game is that as you attempt to work out what has gone wrong on this space station you can see 3D digital recreations of the conversations and movements of the crew. As the crew break up and move about their duties, you can follow them to where they head and see what happens, then rewind and follow someone else. Piecing together the story is going to involve finding the right places to be and the right time to be in them.

# REVOLUTIONISING THE OPEN WORLD WITH SEA OF THIEVES

## WILL RARE'S BIG COMEBACK BE WORTH THE WAIT?

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** UK **RELEASE:** Q3 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC
**PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **DEVELOPER:** RARE

*Sea Of Thieves* is designed to simulate stories, to stimulate a feverish hunger for exploration and an urge to go out in search of the unknown with friends by your side and enemies on the horizon – their thick silhouettes sit calmly against the setting sun, a cautious reminder that danger and adventure is ever-present on the open seas. Rare looks like it could be back to its very best, building a unique and bespoke experience that's quite unlike anything else you'll find in the industry. *Sea Of Thieves* looks like a videogame theme park that beckons you to indulge your most ridiculous pirate fantasies across a sumptuous sprawl of sea and sandy beaches.

At the heart of the experience is the world itself – an open-world, to be more precise, where Rare is leveraging its immense talent in building memorable locales to generate a space that doesn't feel procedural but intimately crafted. A web of connected islands, dungeons and enemy ships full of players looking for loot in their leisure and searching for the adventure of a lifetime. The world itself reflects the sort of gameplay that Rare wants you to encounter in the wild and foster for yourself – fun and freeing, wrapped in an overbearing sense of joy and creativity; the breezy art style ties it all together.

Forming uneasy alliances under the block-blue Dreamcast sky, coming together to explore isles long-forgotten and utilising an array of intuitive mechanics to engage in ship-to-ship combat all comes together to bind the magic of *Sea Of Thieves* into a cohesive whole. What still isn't clear is how much of a traditional quest structure will feature here. With ship customisation, upgradable weapons and loot to be found, it's likely that one will exist, although it may play second fiddle to a sense of progression that is far more potent – one forged expertly from imagination and ingenuity.

The older we get, the less we tend to stimulate the imagination centres of our brain, though you'll need to dust it off for *Sea Of Thieves*, pushing yourself to return to a childlike sense of wonder and manipulation. The game itself thrives on emergent play; honestly, it looks to be perfectly angled towards the Twitch and YouTube generation of gamers/content creators as much as it is anybody else. You'll need to work with friends (and random pirates) as a team to discover plunder and navigate islands – which could be teeming with skeletal marauders or other players looking for mischief – let alone sail a ship across the sea, an activity that requires deft cooperation. Raising the anchor, angling the main sails into the wind, steering and directing the ship, putting out the occasional fire and, yes, fixing a pesky leak threatening to put you at the bottom of the ocean, can only be achieved by working together with those around you.

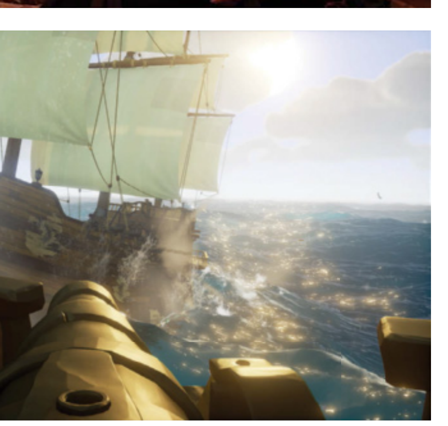
Rare has gone to great lengths to make all of this intuitive and fun, easy to understand but ultimately difficult to master. These are the design tenets that make up this treacherous shared world experience, though ultimately it's up to you to choose how you crew up, how you chart a course through this fantastical world and how well you can maintain your own pirate code of honour in the face of dangerous rival crews. While there are lingering concerns surrounding what will make up the minute-to-minute distractions, they are the very same that would typically be levied at other games that rely on emergent play for entertainment – the likes of *Minecraft*, *DayZ* and countless others that have come to define this era of Twitch-driven consumption. *Sea Of Thieves* is tapping into that culture, building a vibrant game world around it and setting it loose on the oceans. Whether you're on Windows 10 or Xbox One, it's a game that should remain firmly fixed through your spyglass as you sail into the New Year.





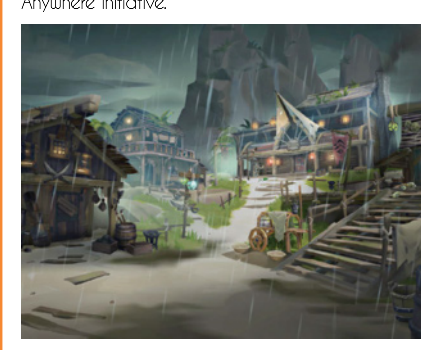
*Sea Of Thieves* has a purposefully limited graphical design, utilising big block colours and large, protruding shapes to make up the basic design of everything from the ships to islands. This is to give everything a unique and identifiable silhouette on the horizon.

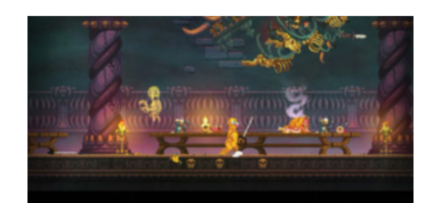




## INSIDER INFORMATION

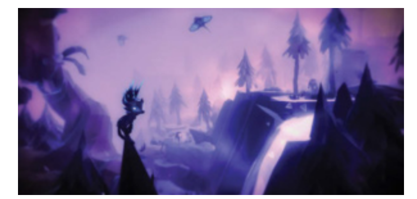
*Sea Of Thieves* is currently allowing those interested into an Insider Program that will potentially give would-be pirates and wanabee marauders the opportunity to get access to an upcoming closed beta in the spring. Of course, the Xbox One faithful will have heard this all before – with the similarly multiplayer-focused *Fable Legends* being given a similar treatment ahead of its eventual closure – though we have a feeling this will only be a positive step in the lead up to Rare's big return in 2017. *Sea Of Thieves* is built on a foundation of player-created fun, and those servers will need to be in fighting-fit shape to handle the overload of Xbox and PC players, an added pressure thanks to Microsoft's Play Anywhere initiative.





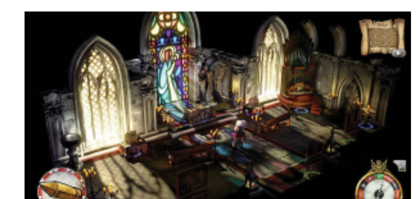
## NIDHOGG 2

A new art style and a selection of new weapons doesn't disguise the fact that this is the same oddly tense and frantic multiplayer fighter that we fell in love with before. The art may throw you off, but the combat is bound to draw us all in.



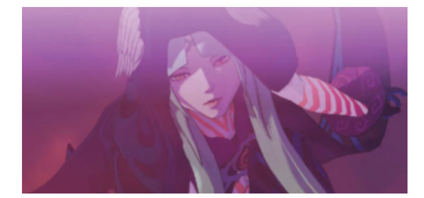
## FE

EA's little 'indie' is a fascinating toe in the water for small-budget projects from the big publisher, following in the footsteps of Ubisoft's UbiArt titles. The high-contrast colour scheme and depiction of nature are superbly realised. Definitely something to keep an eye on.



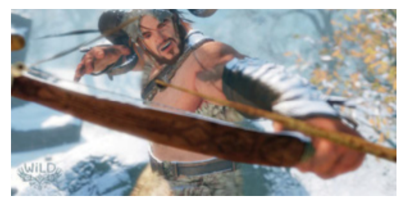
## THE SEXY BRUTALE

Tequila Works still has *Rime* in development, but that's not stopped this collaboration with Cavalier Game Studios to make a murder mystery where you repeat the same day until you can solve the crime. It's a fun concept and it has been very nicely designed by the two teams.



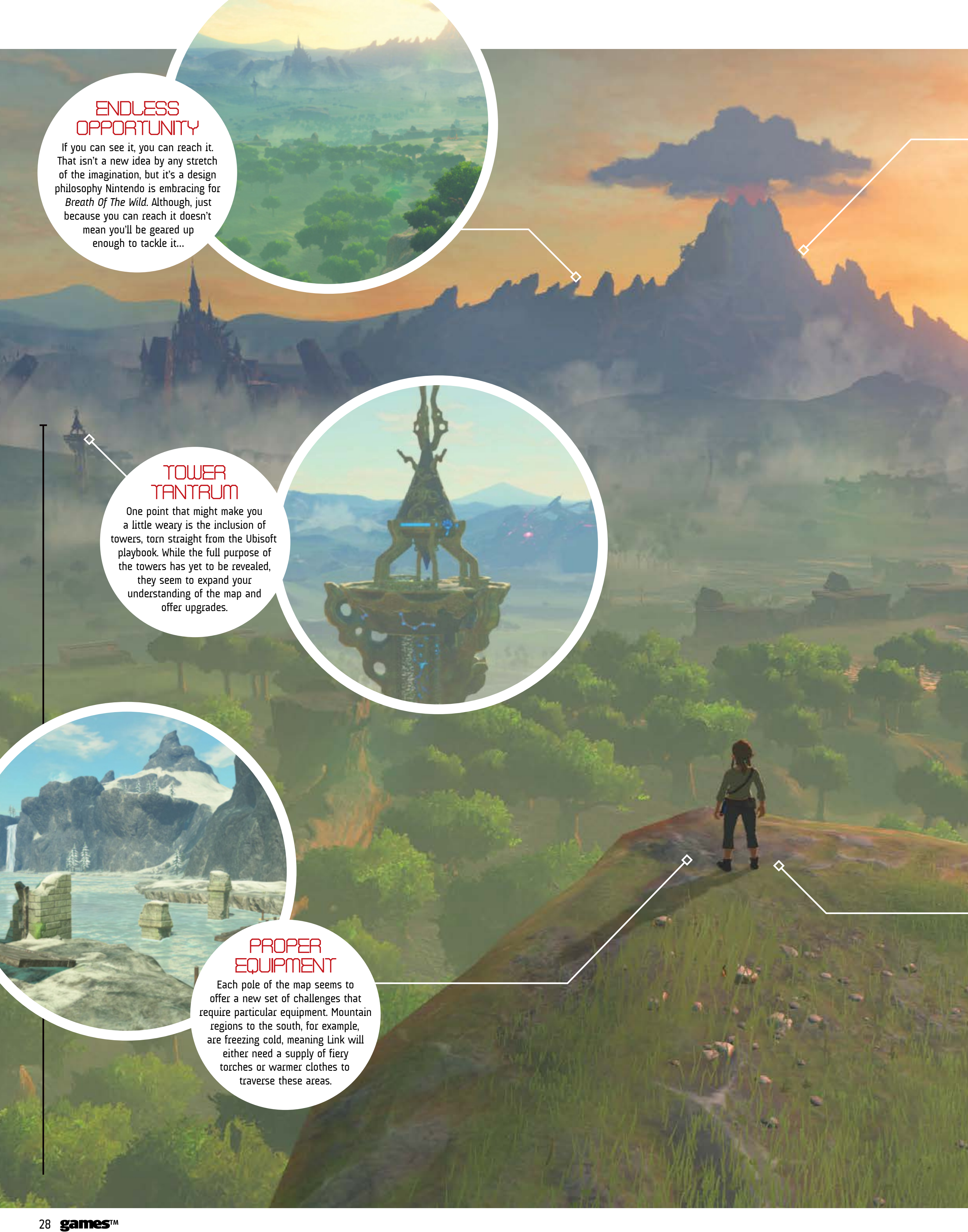
## GRAVITY RUSH 2

You'll get to enjoy this sequel nice and early in 2017 as the PS Vita original gets a surprising but very welcome chance to prove its gravity defying concept a second time. The original was criminally under-appreciated, so hopefully this will deliver again.



## WILD

Michel Ancel has been teasing us with concept images of *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, but we shouldn't forget about this excellent looking survival game that mixes legend and myth with early human civilisation from 10,000 years ago. Surely we're allowed to have both?



## ENDLESS OPPORTUNITY

If you can see it, you can reach it. That isn't a new idea by any stretch of the imagination, but it's a design philosophy Nintendo is embracing for *Breath Of The Wild*. Although, just because you can reach it doesn't mean you'll be geared up enough to tackle it…

## TOWER TANTRUM

One point that might make you a little weary is the inclusion of towers, torn straight from the Ubisoft playbook. While the full purpose of the towers has yet to be revealed, they seem to expand your understanding of the map and offer upgrades.

## PROPER EQUIPMENT

Each pole of the map seems to offer a new set of challenges that require particular equipment. Mountain regions to the south, for example, are freezing cold, meaning Link will either need a supply of fiery torches or warmer clothes to traverse these areas.



## DEATH MOUNTAIN

This version of Hyrule is full of recognisable locations and monuments from *The Legend Of Zelda*'s past, with each suitably ravaged by time and nature. This iteration of Link has been in a stasis slumber for 100 years, and the world has deteriorated substantially from the time he last saw it.

## FULL CUSTOMISATION

Link will need to get geared if he wants any chance of winning this battle against Calamity Ganon and that means you'll need to be on the lookout for new items, weapons and armour. However, there's still no sign of the classic green tunic.

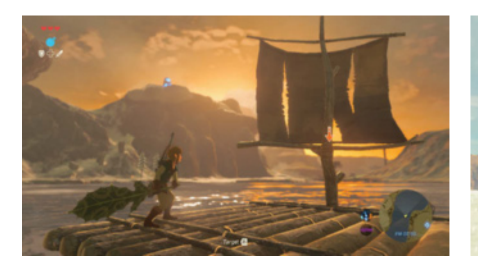
# THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD WILL REFRESH THE OPEN WORLD GENRE

**NINTENDO IS SIMPLIFYING THE OPEN WORLD EXPERIENCE, AND IN DOING SO WE ARE RECEIVING ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING LOOKING GAMES FROM THE COMPANY IN DECADES**

**FORMAT:** SWITCH, WII U **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **RELEASE:** Q1 2017
**PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PLAYERS:** 1

What are we but pilgrims looking for adventure? Disciples that have devoted themselves to crawling across sprawling open worlds in search of hidden artefacts, inspiration and stories. But somewhere along the way we all became lost; disconnected from the raw, intrepid ambitions that once drove us in pursuit of exhilarating discovery and thrilling adventure. That isn't necessarily on our shoulders alone or our apparent determination to cling desperately to the road well travelled, but because developers have largely removed our ability to veer from it in the ways we want to.

The modern interpretation of open-world design is largely host to the very worst of gaming's oldest, most tiresome constructs. Every path leads to a recycled objective, to an item of perceived interest or a planted secret laying out for all to see. Open-world games have become linear adventures that set about checking invisible boxes, guiding you around the sights via map icons and the promise of an eventual reward for clearing every loot box, enemy foothold and collectible in the game world. The challenge has dissipated, the thrill of discovery is diluted. Be it due to spiralling development costs, time investment or mounting publisher pressure, open-world games very rarely trust the player to get *truly* lost – instead they're overwhelmed within these impressively sterile constructs.



Of course, this wasn't always the case. 30 years ago we were introduced to the archetypal open-world experience in *The Legend Of Zelda*. "It's dangerous to go alone" an old man will mutter as you enter a cave too easily avoided. "Take this" he will say, giving you the option of improving your offensive capabilities should you choose to do so. From there you are free to explore, to forge your own adventure in the dangerous, mysterious wildlands of Hyrule. Three decades later, Nintendo is once again entrusting you to choose your very own adventure; to rescue a land in peril, you will be guided by instinct and intuition alone.

*The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* feels like a much needed breath of fresh air. Never has Link enjoyed such a large, sprawling and ultimately open overworld to venture through. It affords you the opportunity to forge your own path, to approach the settling of an ancient score with Ganon and the litany of shadowy forces that have taken up residence in Hyrule in any fashion you deem fit. It's your world to tame, cutting through genre conventions with any kind of weapon that you can lay your hands on. This is all in an attempt to make you feel caught up in a quest that is truly larger than anything you've attempted to conquer before.

Should you know the way, you can make a bee-line for the Master Sword and attempt to tackle Calamity Ganon and his hold over Hyrule Castle; an impossible battle that is sure to stump speed runners for months to come. For the rest of us mere mortals, *Breath Of The Wild* will be an opportunity to get truly lost in a land that simply has no road well travelled. The land is overgrown with gorgeous foliage – it's familiar, a place you might recognise from older games like *Ocarina Of Time* or *A Link To The Past*, albeit a place now warped by the cruel grasp of nature. In a sense, you are discovering it anew just as Link is as he awakens from a hundred-year slumber in stasis.

"IT'S A RETURN TO THE THEMES AND FOUNDATIONS THAT THE FIRST GAME WAS CONVINCINGLY BUILT UPON"

It's a land littered with optional quest lines, dungeons to explore and items to seek out to aid you in your mission – how you choose to discover them is ultimately up to you. The traditional pacing of *The Legend Of Zelda* is being subverted ,then, but the world will still contain series-staples (such as the Master Sword and Triforce). And yet, their application will only be obvious to those that go out of their way to uncover more of the map's secrets. Fortune favours the bold in *Breath Of The Wild*.

Scattered between the silhouettes of landmarks such as Death Mountain and *that* cathedral, now dilapidated and weathered by time, are towns teeming with NPCs, traditional dungeons, environmental puzzles, plenty of treasures and quests to complete. But then there's also 100-plus optional subterranean shrines to venture into; they are puzzles in and of themselves, offering a prize – a new heart container, Sheikah rune piece or perhaps a brand new upgrade – to those that are able to navigate the spaces to their inevitable conclusion. The introduction of a jump button, paraglider and stamina bar mean that Link now has full control over his interactions with the environment, mantling up sheer stone cliffs and traversing bokoblin-infested areas with deft precision. This is *The Legend Of Zelda* not as you've seen it before, but as you have always dreamed it.

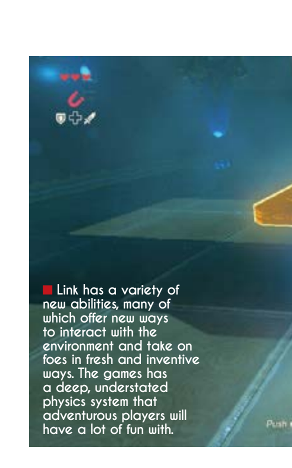
The area that we've had the opportunity to spend time in is called The Plateau, although it is said to only represent one per cent of the total game map– a baffling concept considering its size and scope. We were never far from a treasure chest, an enemy encampment to challenge or an interesting item to distract us from our quest to locate Princess Zelda. And all of this is important, too, not filler to distract or fill an otherwise empty space. Weapons and armour now wear out after extended use, though replacements are never that difficult to come across. Resources such as fruit and meat are necessary to keep Link in the fight – there's no more slicing grass to gather hearts – as you need to forage for ingredients and cook up hearty meals that replenish health, stamina and provide other stat-specific boosts. A day and night cycle (24 minutes equaling 24 hours) also provides a different set of challenges, with scarier monsters coming out at night to help justify the fact that many of the regular foes found out in the world use nightfall as an opportunity to sleep – giving you the opportunity to use stealth to creep into camps and pick off enemies unawares.

Much of this may sound familiar if you've stepped foot into an open-world RPG in the last decade, but most of it is mechanically new for *The Legend Of Zelda*. Nintendo has seen the innovations that have occurred in this space and simplified them, tying all of these ideas together through exploration, new systems and ingenious world design. *Breath Of The Wild* is the huge, sprawling *Zelda* many have been desperate to play since *Twilight Princess* teased a vibrant overworld and *Skyward Sword* later reigned in any hope of expansion. *Breath Of The Wild* isn't as empty as the former, or as limited as the latter.

It's a return to the themes and foundations that the franchise was convincingly built on 30 years ago, letting you venture in any direction, head into any dungeon in any order and explore areas that you aren't supposed to be in – even if that does mean you might get your ass kicked occasionally along the way. *Breath Of The Wild* is freedom; it's a sharp turn away from open-world game design convention, where exploration isn't rewarded with a percentage increase in the menu but with a personal sense of accomplishment. In this world you need to fight for your rewards and your progression, the world isn't massive for the sake of it and designed to bleed time out of you, but because Nintendo wants you to get truly lost and have fun finding the path to completion on your own merit. *Breath Of The Wild* is one of the most expansive and ambitious games we have ever seen from Nintendo and it has the potential to bring change to a genre that can always do with a new, refreshing approach.



While the Wii U version of *Breath Of The Wild* runs fine from our experience with it, we are hoping to see an increase in fidelity and detail on the Switch edition. While vibrant, a lot of the environment and particle effects lack a sharp definition.

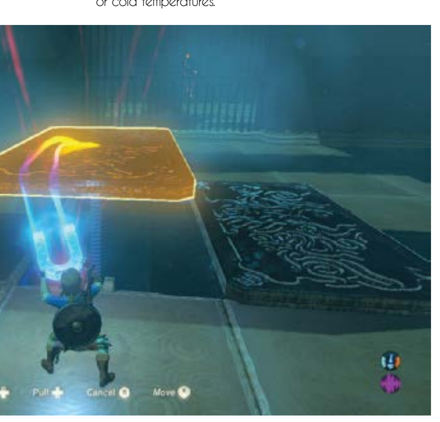


Link has a variety of new abilities, many of which offer new ways to interact with the environment and take on foes in fresh and inventive ways. The games has a deep, understated physics system that adventurous players will have a lot of fun with.





Cooking is an essential part of *Breath Of The Wild*. Ingredients can be foraged for or stolen from enemy encampments, with Link then able to cook up a hearty meal. Recipes can replenish your Hearts or even provide other boosts, such as the ability to withstand extreme hot or cold temperatures.

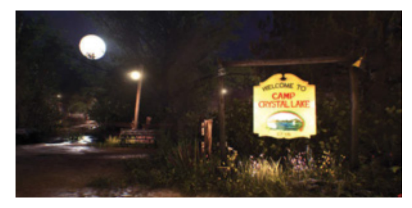


## WHAT WILL SWITCH BRING?

### HOW WILL BREATH OF THE WILD BE IMPROVED BY NINTENDO'S NEW CONSOLE?

*Breath Of The Wild* will be arriving on both the Wii U and Nintendo Switch in 2017. In keeping with the *Legend Of Zelda* tradition, it's highly likely that the game won't make use of the system's most obvious advancements – such as multiplayer on the move. But it *will* tap into the improved technical prowess to provide an experience that is more stable and detailed than that of its last generation brethren. We've played the game on Wii U and, while impressive, it did suffer from environments that – while vibrant and eye-pleasing – lacked definition and crispness. That will change for the Switch iteration, as will the frame rate, expected to be locked to a stable 30fps following a concerning reveal at the VGAs late in 2016. *Breath Of The Wild* is the type of game you will want to get lost in for hours, sinking deeper into the crevices of your couch as you seek out new adventures. It isn't exactly selling the Switch and its new capabilities, although it will be the game that proves the power of Nintendo's latest console effort – a technical showcase that will gladly demonstrate the potential of the new system to any interested parties.



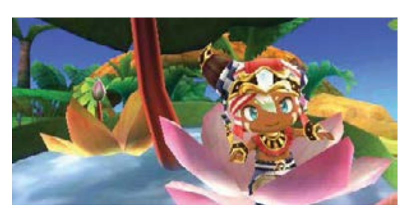

## FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE GAME

Getting to play as Jason Voorhees in this asymmetrical multiplayer game is exactly the kind of concept that we were hoping would come out of games like *Evolve*. Hopefully it will offer enough variety through its open-world design to remain engaging over time.



## STATE OF DECAY 2

This multiplayer zombie survival sequel will be looking to build on the fantastic base that the original game helped to develop. With threats being as common from other survivors as they are from the undead, it's a great concept with a growing list of new features.



## EVER OASIS

This has a great amalgam of gameplay elements, with a town building mechanic reminiscent of *Animal Crossing* mixed with adventure and exploration gameplay similar to *Zelda* and team building (and switching in combat) a bit like *Dragon Age*. Ambitious stuff on 3DS.



## TOKYO 42

Bringing isometric assassination simulation to consoles and PC, *Tokyo 42* is one of these indies that we tapped into pretty early and remain very impressed by. The chaotic gameplay and gorgeous design combine for some dazzling images.



## KNACK 2

We were actually a little surprised to see this sequel to the PS4 launch title, but it was a concept that deserved a second chance after a mixed reception in 2013. Combat is looking a lot more varied and co-op gameplay has been added to the mix.





If there's a more ambitious game in development for 2017 then we haven't heard about it. *Star Citizen* is the big release to watch to see how much bigger games could become.

# WISHING UPON A STAR CITIZEN

## THE KICKSTARTER KING STILL LIVES, BUT WILL IT EVER GET A FULL RELEASE?

**FORMAT:** PC **ORIGIN:** USA **PUBLISHER:** CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES
**DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** MMO

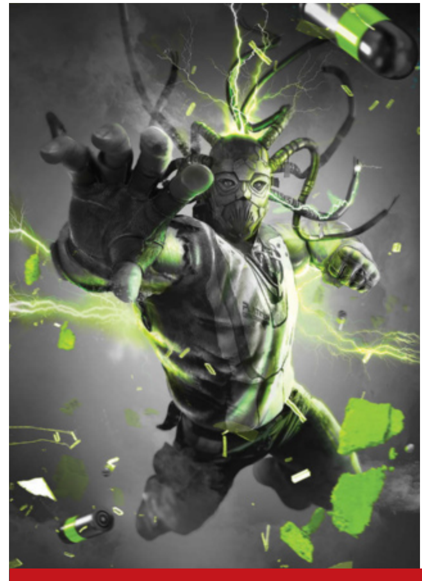
Could 2017 be the year we finally get our hands on *Star Citizen* in all its celestial glory? Now four years and $131 million into its crowdfunded odyssey, that notion remains a tantalising hope (and a frustrating uncertainty) as the game's multiple modes and segments continue to gestate.

Still, game director Chris Roberts and the rest of the teams at Cloud Imperium Games have been quick to assure fans and backers that the grand, genre-hopping adventure is still developing at pace. The space-based dogfighting and races of Arena Commander are still in the Alpha stage, as is an early form of the game's social experience that attempts to show off the grander MMO universe we've been promised.

The multiplayer FPS mode, Star Marine, has also been heavily tested, with the now internally-developed component being teased for imminent release. However, with the quality of *Titanfall 2* and *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*'s equally sci-fi-entrenched firefights having already made an impact with mainstream audiences (and the memory of how badly *EVE: Online* spin-off *Dust 514* fared), we're still unconvinced a multiplayer shooter really suits the grand space-faring of *Star Citizen*.

Cloud Imperium Games recently made its development schedule public as a show of good faith to its backers, seemingly in an attempt to firefight the growing concerns that Squadron 42, Star Marine and its fellow modes might not ever see the light of day. And while it is comforting to see the same schedule that's been shared internally among the dev's four internal studios and 377 employees, there are plenty of worrying takeaways.

The sheer absence of any information regarding Squadron 42, the solo campaign starring Mark Hamill and Gillian Anderson, certainly doesn't bode well. Neither does the confirmation that none of the goals set out in the schedule are set in stone and could change at any time. Such is the nature of modern games development, but it certainly doesn't allay our fear of never seeing the *Star Citizen* we were sold.



# LAWBREAKERS LOOKS TO TAKE THE LAW INTO ITS OWN HANDS

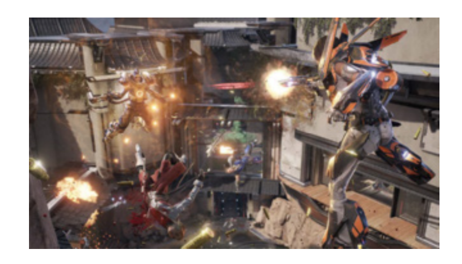
## THE MULTIPLAYER SHOOTER WANTS TO CAPTURE THE PC-ONLY MARKET

**FORMAT:** PC **ORIGIN:** USA **PLAYERS:** MULTIPLAYER
**DEVELOPER:** BOSS KEY PRODUCTIONS
**PUBLISHER:** NEXON **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

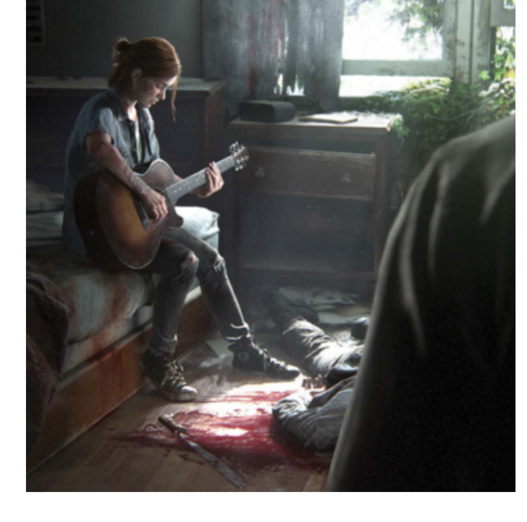
With so many shooters having dropped in the last 12 months, *Lawbreakers* is looking to set itself apart with its moody set of 'anti-hero' characters. Boss Key is consciously shooting for a more mature tone, so out go the brightly-coloured meme darlings and in come assassins and DEA agents who just want to kill things and swear about it.

Boss Key isn't just focusing on PC as a sole platform - it's going full-on old school PC across the game's entire setup, right down to the way it's played. As it stands the game offers limited support for gamepads, so it's back to the days of keyboard and mouse or bust. It's certainly in line with that back-to-basics ethos, but it's a design choice that might end up alienating a market that's integrated Xbox One controllers and the like for years.

*Lawbreakers* certainly shows promise, but there are two games looming in the shadows of the multiplayer shooter arena who might chuck a spanner (or a grenade) in the works – *Quake Champions* and *Unreal Tournament*. Both are aimed at capturing the PC-only online shooter market like a bloodstained flag, and *Lawbreakers* could struggle to cement itself in an increasingly crowded genre.



# FIVE THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT THE LAST OF US: PART II



THE SURPRISE SEQUEL THAT EVERYONE IS DESPERATE TO PLAY

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** USA **PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** NAUGHTY DOG **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

## ALL GROWN UP

1 Surviving on the collapse of civilisation takes its toll on the mind. Joel and Ellie went through hell in *The Last Of Us*, its damning conclusion still haunting the minds of gamers to this day. Its effect seems to have had a similar impact on the two protagonists, the pair swept up in another adventure defined by violence and attrition. Ellie is taking a central role this time out as the lead character, though it is set a number of years into the future – she is 19 years old now, her youthful exuberance burned away with an all-consuming hatred.

## LOVE & HATRED

2 The announcement trailer highlighted a world that has somehow transcended to a bleaker plane of existence. If there is any salvation – any hope – to be found in it, it doesn't look as if Ellie is searching for it. Her hands calloused and cut, blood trickles down her cheek as she peers over a fresh corpse. her sombre rendition of Shawn James's *Through The Valley* creating a miasma of tension and sorrow. If the first game was about trust and the relationship Joel and Ellie built together, *The last Of Us: Part II* is about hatred.

## NEW TECH

3 Naughty Dog hasn't confirmed what game engine it will be using for the follow up, though it has revealed that it is using brand new mocap technology to capture the nuance in Ashley Johnson (Ellie) and Troy Baker's (Joel) body and facial movements. The intricate detail – the crinkles on the brow, the subtle movements of the eyes and cheeks – on Ellie in this reveal trailer were incredible, pushing past uncanny valley and into a new territory entirely. Expect something special when this finally launches.

## DON'T WORRY

4 There has been a lot of concern from the community that, by continuing Joel and Ellie's story, the poignancy of *The Last Of Us*'s ending would be somehow diminished. Creative director Neil Druckmann has acknowledged these fears, assuring us that Naughty Dog has it in hand. He noted that the team had played with other characters in the same universe but it never felt right. *The Last Of Us: Part II* is a complementary story, then, with Druckmann simply asking: "that fans of the first one put faith in us".

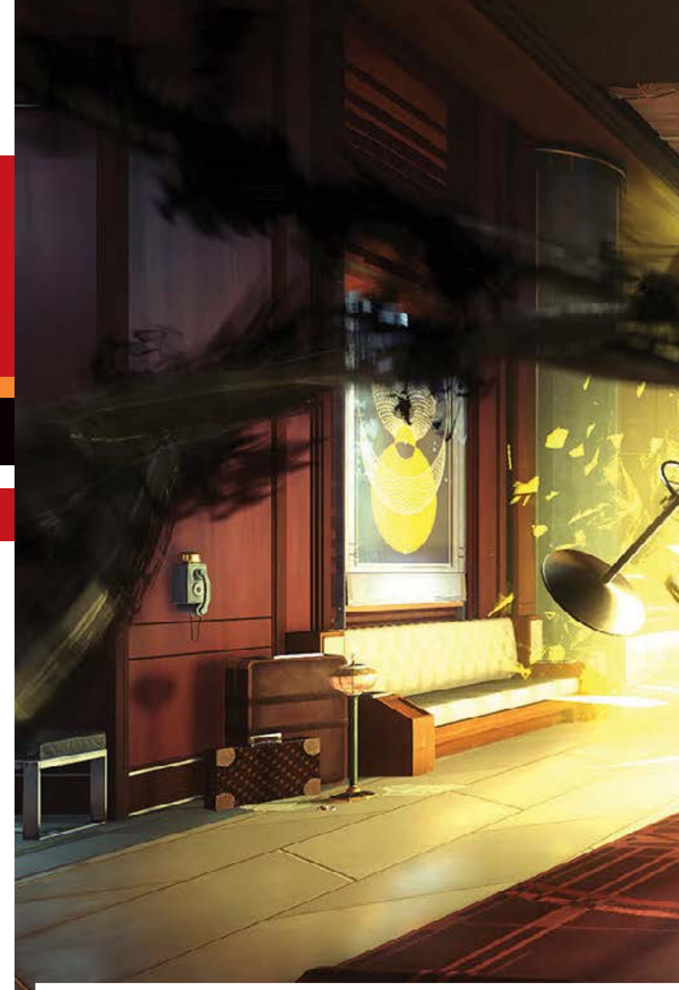
## SOME WAYS AWAY

5 *The Last Of Us: Part II* is now in active development. We know that two-time Academy Award-winning composer Gustavo Santaolalla will be returning to score the game, while it will be co-written by *Westworld* writer Halley Gross and returning game director Neil Druckmann – though it is understood that Bruce Straley (who co-directed the original) will not be returning. What we do not know is exactly when it is coming out. It will likely dominate the conversation through 2017 though.

# THE LESSONS THAT PREY CAN LEARN FROM DISHONORED

## HOW ARKANE'S LATEST MIGHT BE THE MOST INTERESTING SHOOTER OF 2017

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** USA **PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA
**DEVELOPER:** ARKANE STUDIOS **RELEASE:** Q3 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1



If *Dishonored 2* has unequivocally proven anything, it's that Arkane Studios is one of the very best developers in the world when it comes to distilling down the elements that make up a great, reactive and expansive, first-person experience. That expertise will feed into *Prey*, a beast the likes of which we have never seen from the studio – or, for that matter, so far during this generation.

It's easy enough to classify *Prey* as a first-person shooter. You are, after all, locked behind the eyes of protagonist Morgan Yu (who can be played as either a man or a woman) and, yes, you're going up against an array of creepy extraterrestrial monsters just begging to be blasted by futuristic weaponry, but to write it off as such would be doing it, and yourself, a huge disservice. *Prey*, like *Dishonored* before it, falls into that awkward 'immersive sim' category; a genre that exists without proper rules or definition – though it's that flexibility that works to the benefit of *Prey*. It's an inherently flexible game, designed in such a way that you'll be able to determine your own destiny as you explore the overrun hellscape that is space-station/secret government research facility Talos I.

You are caught in a loop of survival and struggle as you push your way deeper into the mysteries of the space station and its experimental work on the strange alien life forms dubbed the Typhon. You are, of course, hilariously un-equipped to deal with – let alone escape – the threat of enemies that warp the laws of nature as we've come to understand them, and so you must survive with whatever you get your hands on. Be it weapons, wits or mind-bending abilities, each will play a pivotal role in your progression.

We know Arkane Studios can work its way around a good ability system. *Dishonored 2* has given us that much, with the studio demonstrating a skill set that amplifies creative play but maybe struggles on the narrative end of things. This will be something that Arkane will need to work on, of course, although the comparatively open-ended structure should allow for a greater emphasis on environmental and emergent storytelling.

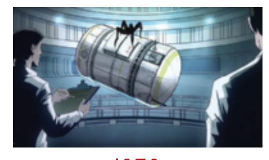
*Prey* is designed around a system of power consumption, whereby you are able to absorb some of the powers of your alien-foes and exhibit similar techniques. There's Mimic, which lets you become *literally* any item in the game so long as it is in close proximity to you; perfect for those occasions where transforming into a coffee cup will allow you to roll through a small security booth window undetected. There's a Leverage ability that allows you to harness great strength to move otherwise unmovable objects, and another called Kinetic Blast which can clear the ground of frozen enemies or propel objects into the air. Speaking of freezing enemies, that's done from a foam-spitting Gloo-Gun that you can acquire through the Fabrication system, a 3D printer of sorts that allows you to create items (be they tools, jet packs or space suits to get outside the station) so long as you have the relevant items and blueprints. Of course, the fact that these



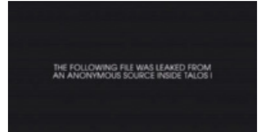
## EXPLORING PREY'S ALTERNATE HISTORY



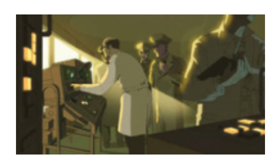
**1958**
**SMALL STEPS**
The Soviet Union launches the Vorona I Satellite in an attempt to secure an early lead in the space race, it enters a stable orbit around Earth's Moon at Lagrange Point 2 [LP2].



**1959**
**DEEP SPACE**
The satellite begins transmitting deep space telemetry back to Earth but communication quickly ceased, prompting a manned mission to investigate. It goes awry, quickly.




**1960**
**FIRST CONTACT**
Following the discovery of the shape shifting Typhon creatures – and after failing to contain the emerging threat – the Soviet Union contacts the United States for assistance.



**1963**
**KLETKA PROGRAM**
The US and Soviet Union announce their collaboration – dubbed the KLETKA Program – with the specific goal of containing and researching the exterritorial threat aboard the remodelled Veronica I Satellite, now a fully-functioning R&D facility.

While *Prey* will feature many different types of weapons, they will be sparsely used. Ammunition is limited, forcing you to rely on your supernatural powers.

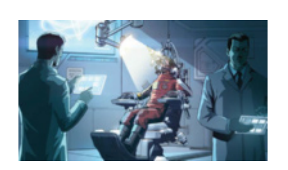
abilities are absorbed from enemies means, you get it, that every enemy type you encounter in the game will have a maxed version of these powers – think about it, that means that any object in any room could conceivably be an enemy, which is absolutely *terrifying*.

These abilities can all be combined and abused in a similar fashion to the system seen in *Dishonored 2*, which should make for excellent variety of play – though it's perhaps more impressive in how it will effect the environment. *Prey* isn't designed around select missions or traditional narrative structure, instead it is designed in such a way that it feels like a compartmentalised Metroidvania, encouraging you to obtain new abilities and tools and then explore areas to find new ways to progress.

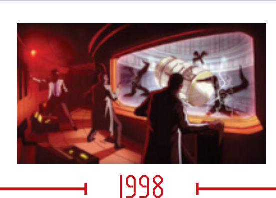
*BioShock* in the stars then, right? That might be a bit of a stretch, though the Neo-Deco art vibes will certainly help you arrive at that conclusion. Though, truth be told, *Prey* is building on a variety of influences to become something quite unique and enthralling; alongside the spirit of *Dishonored* you'll find systemic and mechanical iterations and innovations born out of *System Shock 2*, of *Half-Life* and even the original *Prey*. Arkane is stretching itself here, building a game that takes cues from some of the brightest science-fiction games of the past three decades, creating something wickedly unique in the process.



### 1963
**ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT**
John F Kennedy survives an assassination attempt, prompting the president to pump more resources into the US space program. Kennedy seizes control of the research and development initiative.



### 1983
**MILITARY APPLICATION**
Under the watchful gaze of the US government, scientists continues to research the Typhon in an attempt to harness its strange power set for military application, though this ultimately proves to be problematic.



### 1998
**CRITICAL FAILURE**
The KLETKA Program is brought to a close after a containment failure leaves all personnel on the station dead or otherwise unaccounted for. With the Typhon loose, the space facility is abandoned and scrubbed from record.



### 2030
**SECOND CHANCES**
Many decades later, the TranStar Corporation purchases the R&D facility and transforms it into a cutting-edge space station. Named Talos One, the station is used to secretly conduct morally dubious experiments on those living aboard the station.



### 2032
**PREY BEGINS**
With TranStar eager to turn its experiments into a product it can sell by 2035 it became sloppy, leading to another containment breach. This time, the Typhon are running riot on Talos One – though now they are up against you, Morgan Yu.



Ryo remains one of the most beloved characters in gaming, perhaps in part because we've seen him at his best and worst through the series and now we may actually get to see him take his revenge.

# WHY SHENMUE III MATTERS SO MUCH

## IT'S ABOUT THE FANBASE, STUPID

**FORMAT:** PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PUBLISHER:** YS NET **DEVELOPER:** YS NET, NEILO **RELEASE:** DECEMBER 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

You may not be a big *Shenmue* fan. That's okay. You're wrong, but we forgive you. We jest, of course (a little), but *Shenmue* is an incredibly important series that legitimately fosters a lot of passion from those who had the pleasure of playing it. When Yu Suzuki first brought his vision for an RPG to the Dreamcast it flew in the face of conventional thinking. *Shenmue* makes a mockery of the concept of a 'Japanese RPG'. It's a role-playing game and it's made in Japan (and set there in the case of the original release), but it has little in common with the atmosphere, tone, gameplay, mechanics, music, characters or style of a *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*.

And, once again, we start talking about *Shenmue III* by pontificating on the triumphs of the past, so let's redirect our attention back to the game at hand. *Shenmue III* is a little bit of a mystery, which is probably why we spend so much time reflecting on what came before it, but it's important because this is a voice in gaming that we haven't heard from in a while. *Shenmue* set a new agenda for action-RPG design. It put a focus on exploration and immersion alike, which had always been important but not to this degree. And so *Shenmue III* represents another chance to invest ourselves in the life of Ryo and his search for justice.

More importantly it's a chance to see a story finished that many people spent hours upon hours involving themselves with. Ryo's struggle was a very real one. It involved painstaking hours of manual labour that we as players had to share. It involved taking on real jobs, getting into fights, walking through markets and living a life. We got to see the mundane side of Ryo's reality as well as its thrills, but the ending has never been told. We've been left dangling, waiting for a resolution.

For all that we're keeping our expectations of *Shenmue III* modest as best we can, we have to say that some of the environment modelling and lighting effects we've been seeing are very impressive.

And the fans who have tracked, pestered and pleaded deserve so much credit for their consistent campaign. They refused to let *Shenmue* die. They refused to allow Yu Suzuki to fade into obscurity. They refused the call to play *Yakuza* instead and be satisfied (some of them probably enjoyed it, but it didn't satisfy them). *Shenmue III* is a testament to the power of gamers uniting behind a good cause. There was nothing malicious about the calls for *Shenmue* to be supported. It came from a place of love and for once it really paid off.

Seeing *The Last Guardian* launch this year has reminded us of the importance of a certain level of realism about what games can be after years in development or out in the wilderness. In many ways this return shares much in common with a follow-up to *Shadow Of The Colossus* in that, although the two games couldn't be more diametrically opposed, they similarly broke with conventions to offer a new take on classic Japanese game design conventions. *Shenmue III* has been well-funded by fans, but perhaps not to the level of modern blockbusters and so, like *The Last Guardian*, it may not be looking to compete at that level. But so long as we're willing to let our imaginations fill any gaps that may exist, *Shenmue III* can still be the powerful, emotional and uplifting sequel we've waited so long for.



# 5 THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR IN DAYS GONE

## A ZOMBIE GAME WITH A FEW MORE BRAINS?

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** USA **PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** SIE BEND STUDIO **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

**1** The rivers of dead effect that the zombie physics engine has in this game is mesmerising. Watching the undead horde clamber and dash towards you is so distracting, it might just get you killed. It's a far cry from the lumbering statues in some zombie games.

**2** The bike really counts for something in this game. Bend has said that the bike plays a huge role in the gameplay and isn't just a piece of character jewellery to legitimise its biker gang lead. That bike will be needed to traverse this world.

**3** If anything this game is reminding us more of *Red Dead Redemption* than your typical survival game with its lush backdrop and largely rural (from what we've seen so far) locations. A biker as the modern frontiersman? Works for us – thematically at least.

**4** The zombies are evolving. Or rather what this game refers to as 'freakers' are evolving so the Newt and Horde types we've seen are only the beginning of the threat you'll be facing. After two years of infection, who knows what is out there?

**5** Stealth is an option. You wouldn't have thought it with a loud motorbike and all those undead to try and navigate, but Bend says that so long as you maintain a low profile you should be able to sneak your way around many objectives.



# BACK TO SCHOOL WITH PERSONA 5

## DUST OFF YOUR TEXTBOOKS BECAUSE THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GET PERSONAL

**FORMAT:** PS4, PS3 **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PLAYERS:** 1
**DEVELOPER:** ATLUS **PUBLISHER:** DEEP SILVER
**RELEASE:** 4 APRIL 2017

The next full-fat *Persona* game is almost in reach. We can practically taste those turn-based battles from here. And with its Japanese release this past September, the announcement of an April 2017 window for the West is hardly a surprise – the series typically takes around six months to make the localisation leap.

The game's story will follow a single year in the life of a Japanese high school with a sumptuous mix of RPG-style melodrama returning alongside dungeon-crawling and turn-based battles. The social exploration and dialogue system has been expanded – corridors are no longer sparsely populated but filled with students, while Tokyo itself has been broadened into entire city districts.

*Persona*'s hyper-stylised world has always had a finger or two on the social developments of its time. Since we all live out of our phones, the cast of Shujin High School use their own messaging system to keep dialogue trees and relationship goals flowing. There's even an app to help you transition to the Persona-filled world of The Palace.

Talking of the Palace – the new setting for those crazy demonic battles – the turn-based dust-ups we all love are back, but with the added caveat of being able to pack both a melee weapon and a ranged weapon alongside your ability to summon your Persona of choice. Add to that a slick, ultra stylish design that that drips with confidence and you've got one of 2017's most unique offerings.





# OUTLAST 2

## TIME TO FILM ANOTHER TERRIFYING SLICE OF PACIFIST SURVIVAL-HORROR

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** CANADA
**PUBLISHER:** RED BARRELS **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
**RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

The sequel to 2013's sleeper horror hit *Outlast 2* may be adopting a brand new, *Deliverance*-style setting in the intimidating wilds of the Sonoran Desert, but that familiar sense of player vulnerability is ready to scare you stupid a second time.

*Outlast 2* will retain your inability to fight back, with new journalist protagonist Blake Langermann now possessing a much more advanced camera than the one boasted by Miles Upsher in the first game.

The first game was a little janky in places but it helped pave the way for first-person scare-a-thons on console so we're intrigued to see how Red Barrels keeps the frights coming.



# SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR 3

## CI GAMES' UNDERRATED SNIPER SIM KEEPS IT MODERN

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** POLAND
**PUBLISHER:** CI GAMES **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
**RELEASE:** 4 APRIL 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC

A first-person shooter with a modern setting? With no sci-fi bits? How very 2007. The folks behind the stealth-focused *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* threequel are sticking to their ghillied-up guns and keeping things familiar with a fictitious civil war in Georgia.

The biggest departure for the game's third outing is the decision to drop the semi-linear sandbox levels of the previous games in favour of a vast open-world.

Going sandbox makes sense considering the open-nature of the previous game, and it's a design choice that could make for plenty of player agency when it comes to tackling missions.




We can't wait to get a look at *GT Sport* on a 4K TV and see what Polyphony has achieved with its latest graphical masterpiece. These games have always pushed visuals that rival anything else you could see on the market.

# SHIFTING TO A NEW GEAR WITH GT SPORT

## GRAN TURISMO EMBRACES ITS RACING-FOCUSED SPLIT PERSONALITY

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** POLYPHONY DIGITAL **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC

As the first game to bear the *Gran Turismo* name on PS4, there's a lot riding on *Gran Turismo Sport* and its current-gen take on the world of virtual drivetime. Long-serving series overlord Kazunori Yamauchi is calling it the first game in a "new generation" of driving simulators so we've high hopes for what a new chapter brings to the *GT* legacy.

Yamauchi and company have gone on record saying *GT Sport* is *Gran Turismo 7* in all but name, the big difference being the introduction of official IFA events (you even get an official in-game IFA driving licence at one point). There's clearly a desire to chase a new kind of legitimacy with *GT Sport*, as well as a hunger to embrace new ideas. As a result, *GT Sport* will follow *Driveclub*'s example and offer support for PlayStation VR when it arrives in 2017.

Considering every car in the game has been rebuilt to support fully detailed interiors, that inclusion of VR will certainly help *GT* shake off that pervading stagnancy that's gripped the series for years. *GT6* felt like a carbon copy of *GT5*, but that isn't to say that *GT Sport* has exercised all its past demons. Based on the same engine and physics model as *GT6*, the new game features no dynamic damage system of any kind, making it feel oddly sterile compared to the likes of *Forza Horizon 6*.

There's no dynamic weather or day/night cycles, either. It's a bizarre omission and one that makes *GT Sport* feel more like a prologue than a full entry – especially in a genre where *Driveclub* and *Forza Horizon 3* have some of the most photorealistic skyboxes ever seen, *GT Sport* keeps pushing itself further and further down the starting grid, which is odd for such a revered series.

Yet, for all those strange absences, there's still plenty to get your revs up here. Polyphony's mission to create the most impressive looking cars in gaming continues unchallenged, with a new Scapes mode included so you can admire each chassis detail from every possible angle. It's also the best looking *GT* we've seen yet, with a lighting model that glitters confidently in motion. Online has also been given an overhaul, with the turgid menus of old traded for a far more agreeable social media-style feed.

# THE BLOCKBUSTERS TO RETURN

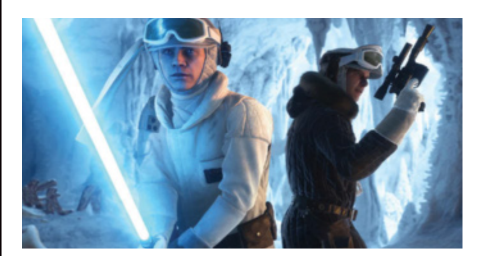
THE BIG TITLES WE KNOW ARE ON THE WAY, BUT HAVEN'T BEEN CONFIRMED YET



## CALL OF DUTY 2017

**DEVELOPER:** SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES
**PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION **RELEASE:** NOV 2017

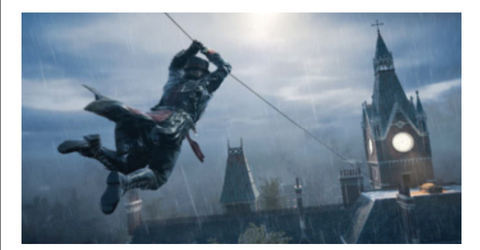
As tempted as we are to reference this as *Advanced Warfare 2*, we suspect that in actuality the Sledgehammer team will have been working on a different concept as the wheel of *COD* development swings back around. There's been some chatter about a return to World War II or perhaps something in Vietnam. We would like something that took a step back from the sci-fi direction the series has increasingly found itself heading in.



## STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT 2

**DEVELOPER:** EA MOTIVE
**PUBLISHER:** EA **RELEASE:** OCT 2017

Jade Raymond's newly minted team in Montreal will be getting its first opportunity to shine next year with the follow up to 2015's *Battlefront* return from DICE. We don't have too many specifics about content, but scenarios based on the latest movies have been suggested and hints have been made that a single-player campaign will be included. Fans of the original *Battlefront* games will also be hoping for more space combat levels.



## ASSASSIN'S CREED 2017

**DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT
**RELEASE:** NOV 2017

Is this the year for *Assassin's Creed* to make its triumphant return? We're hoping so as recent rumours point to an Egyptian setting, which brings to mind some of the aesthetics of one of *Creed*'s original inspirations, *Prince Of Persia*. The break in annual releases will hopefully have given all of the franchise's many development studios time to reflect and polish. Another buggy release is likely to be the final nail in the coffin.



## PES 2018

**DEVELOPER:** PES PRODUCTIONS
**PUBLISHER:** KONAMI **RELEASE:** SEP 2017

Most of what we would like to see added to *PES* at this point is cosmetic, with an overhaul of the menu system, music, load times and custom kit designs long overdue. After a second year of producing a top-level football sim experience we'd like to see PES Productions add a little swagger to the package. Right now its budget feels like the only thing standing between *PES* and a chance at making a real dent in the *FIFA* fanbase.




## FIFA 18

**DEVELOPER:** EA CANADA
**PUBLISHER:** EA **RELEASE:** SEP 2017

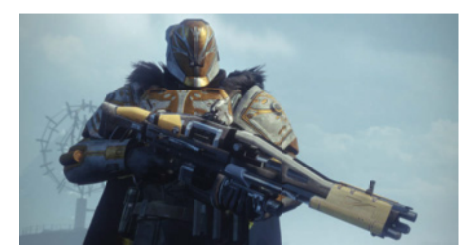
Since this will be the game leading up to the 2018 World Cup in Russia we'll be expecting to see the tournament represented in the game in some fashion, not least with a continuation of The Journey. On a broader note we would also like to see women's football given a bigger slice of the disc, possibly with the addition of some Super League sides or more national teams. Progress on this series remains strong.




## FORZA MOTORSPORT 7

**DEVELOPER:** TURN 10 STUDIOS
**PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT **RELEASE:** SEP 2017

With Turn 10 having been involved in the development of the Xbox One we would imagine it is a very important in Microsoft's eyes. Look for *Forza Motorsport 7* to lead the charge on Project Scorpio with 4K and the benchmark of 60fps likely to be the headline grabbing features. Could VR support also be included? If Scorpio launches with VR headset options then that seems highly likely too.



## DESTINY 2

**DEVELOPER:** BUNGIE
**PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION **RELEASE:** SEP 2017

This year? Surely. *Destiny* continues to be a massive presence in our gaming lives, which wasn't 100 percent certain at launch, but it's really gone from strength to strength with regular updates and improvements since its release. That all said, a fully-fledged sequel with a reworking of systems and more fundamental upgrades of graphics and design would be very welcome.

# WHY HORIZON: ZERO DAWN MIGHT HAVE 2017'S MOST COMPELLING HERO

## THE MORE WE FIND OUT ABOUT ALOY, THE MORE WE LIKE HER

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** NETHERLANDS **PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** GUERRILLA GAMES **RELEASE:** 28 FEB 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

Guerrilla Games is keeping its cards incredibly close to its chest with regards to the world and lore of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. That's good news for anyone looking forward to discovering all of the game's mysteries and stories first hand, but perhaps less helpful if you feel like you need to have a better sense of the depth of this universe before you commit. Thankfully, we've been immersing ourselves in *Horizon* for some time and we're beginning to build a picture of this universe that excites us a great deal, not least its lead, Aloy.

It's interesting to note that, according to the development team, Aloy emerged from the earliest concepts of the game, a figure standing in the foreground of concept art, looking out over the vast vistas of this post post-apocalyptic vision of earth. The more the team looked at her, the more it became clear they had a figure they could build a game around, and the process of filling out her backstory (or, perhaps, lack of one) began in earnest.

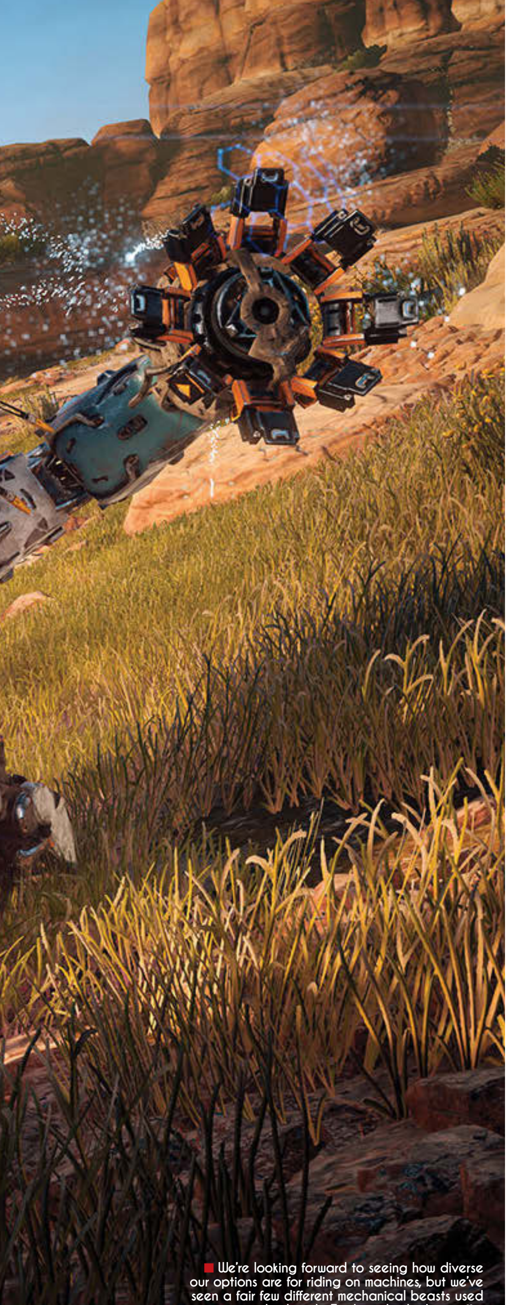
"IT'S INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT, ACCORDING TO THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM, ALOY EMERGED FROM THE EARLIEST CONCEPTS OF THE GAME"

As it stands, Aloy is an outcast, unaware of her own history or true heritage having been shunned by her clan, the Nora tribe, when she was just an infant. While she still has some dealings with the Nora, she does not know who her mother was or what caused her to be banished so harshly. This acts as the opening mystery for Aloy and a driving force behind her inquisitive nature. It is also the reason why she

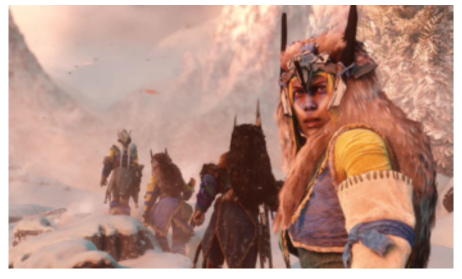





You'll have all sorts of equipment on you for handling different machines, one of the most useful being the handy scanner above Aloy's ear that can help you to identify key weak spots.



We're looking forward to seeing how diverse our options are for riding on machines, but we've seen a fair few different mechanical beasts used as steeds already. Each is also likely to offer different attributes and strengths as an ally.



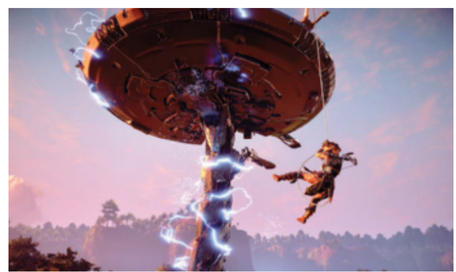
One thing to look through the game is the way that different tribes build their clothing and the way machine parts are often woven in as almost ceremonial or prestigious items. Aloy herself can be seen with all sorts of different armour pieces taken from the machines.



Aloy has different types of arrowhead she can employ when facing off against a hostile machine and we expect each machine will have its weaknesses as well as some all-important weak spots you can take advantage of.



*Horizon* has opted for the classic conversation wheel for making your choices through meetings with NPCs around the world. It's not clear yet whether there's an extensive reputation system at play behind this, but it's a welcome touch.



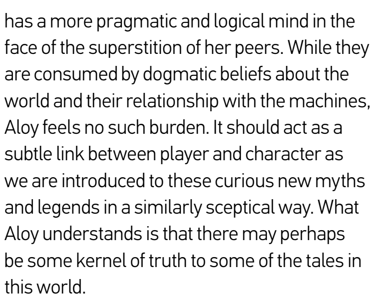


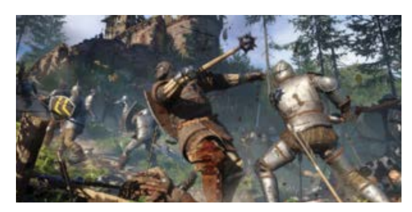


has a more pragmatic and logical mind in the face of the superstition of her peers. While they are consumed by dogmatic beliefs about the world and their relationship with the machines, Aloy feels no such burden. It should act as a subtle link between player and character as we are introduced to these curious new myths and legends in a similarly sceptical way. What Aloy understands is that there may perhaps be some kernel of truth to some of the tales in this world.

Aloy's upbringing and the lack of information about her past is made all the more potent by the heritage of the tribe she belonged to. The Nora are a matriarchal people, meaning that it reveres motherhood above all other things and places its elder women in the highest leadership roles. To be motherless in such a culture leaves Aloy all the more stricken and perhaps more alien to the other Nora. It gives Aloy an inner pain or hunger that humanises her as a hero, but doesn't necessarily make her more vulnerable, which is a tricky line to walk with a new character.

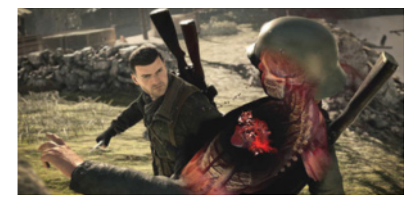
And so through Aloy we get to see this incredible new world with its robotic dinosaurs and buried world history. The 1,000 years that have passed from our time to Aloy's have seen many changes and stories unfold, not least the origin of the machines themselves (which Guerrilla promises the game will reveal), why there doesn't appear to be any predator and prey relationship between the machines (but they do fight, so that's curious), and the burying of structures in the earth that may or may not be human in origin. These are the overarching mysteries of *Horizon* that Guerrilla is reticent to reveal anything about, and for that we are rather grateful. The promise of what this game can deliver is far too good to spoil now.





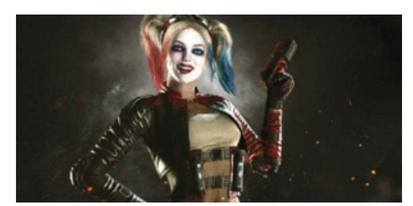
## KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE

The idea of an RPG about the son of blacksmith wouldn't normally excite, except that this story takes place in 1403 Bohemia just as war reaches your home. The levelling mechanics and realistic sword combat are going to make this an incredibly tough game.



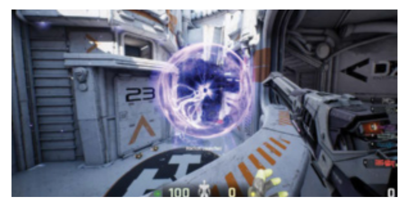
## SNIPER ELITE 4

Rebellion's return to its sniper action experience is all about going bigger. The environments on offer here are massive with lots of options for stealth and all sorts of side objectives to complete. And of course the x-ray kills are back and just as gruesome as before.



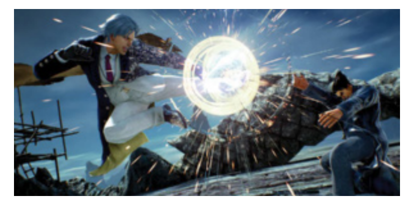
## INJUSTICE 2

Warner is bringing the heroes and villains of the DC world back for another round of fisticuffs and thanks to the improvements to NetherRealm's fighting engine it looks stunning. Some playing around with armour for the characters is an interesting new addition too.



## UNREAL TOURNAMENT

If you didn't already know, Epic has had its latest *Unreal Tournament* in open beta for months now and is taking player feedback incredibly seriously. We'll be looking for a formal release this coming year, but you can still shape how it comes out.



## TEKKEN 7

Having spent some time playing the latest *Tekken* we can confirm it's everything you would expect from this series; meaty combat, explosive combos, insane characters and a bonkers story. It's translated beautifully to this generation of consoles.



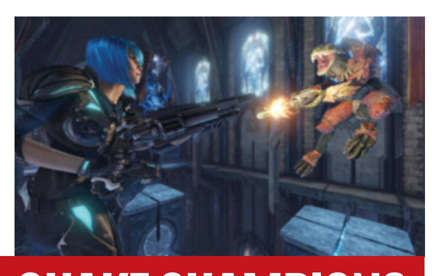
# SCALEBOUND

## STOP DRAGON YOUR FEET WITH PLATINUMGAMES' NEW IP

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** JAPAN
**PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT STUDIOS **DEVELOPER:** PLATINUM GAMES **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-4

Following a glut of forgettable, yet mildly entertaining licensed tie-ins, we've started to worry that Platinum was losing its touch. But amid all those vapid franchise forays there's a glimmer of hope – an original IP with Hideki Kamiya at the reins.

*Scalebound* is certainly taking its time to swoop onto Xbox One and PC, but if the details we've seen so far are anything to go by, it's going to raise plenty of temperatures. Main man Drew and scaly dragon pal Thuban will work independently in combat, but using a special Dragon-Link mode will enable you to take control of the winged monstrosity and turn your enemies extra crispy.



# QUAKE CHAMPIONS

## ID SOFTWARE GOES OLD-SCHOOL WITH ITS LATEST SHOOTER REBOOT

**FORMAT:** PC **ORIGIN:** USA **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC
**PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
**DEVELOPER:** ID SOFTWARE **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

It's clear id wants to tap into that golden age of online shooters that rode on the success of *Unreal Tournament* and *Quake 3 Arena*, and so the latest incarnation drops all that single-player nonsense last seen in 2005's *Quake 4* in favour of a back-to-basics approach to gameplay.

id is keeping pretty tight-lipped on whether *Quake Champions* will be released as a full-game or in a more free-to-play-esque guise, but we do know it'll be running at 120Hz with a totally unlocked frame rate. Add the news that the game will be opting for *Overwatch*-style heroes with unique abilities and skills, and we're already polishing our rocket launcher in anticipation.



# OUT GO THE MECHS AND IN COME THE UNDEAD IN METAL GEAR SURVIVE

## ARE ZOMBIES THE ANSWER TO A KOJIMA-LESS METAL GEAR?

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
**DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC

Over a year on from the very public fall out between Konami and Hideo Kojima, and the Metal Gear auteur's tear-inducing farewell sausage, the Japanese publisher shocks absolutely no one by carrying on its most recognisable franchise with a brand new entry.

So can *Metal Gear* really continue without its creator at the helm? Well, that's a question *Metal Gear Survive* is unlikely to answer considering it's a multiplayer-only affair, it's set in an alternate dimension and it's a zombie game. Because if Konami is good at one thing, it's identifying the zeitgeist while it's still fresh…

In order to fit itself into the existing *Metal Gear* timeline (or side-step it completely), the events of the game take place shortly before *The Phantom Pain* as the remnants of Mother Base are absorbed into an alternate dimension full of crystalline zombs known as 'creatures'. In other words, there's unlikely to be much story here, instead you're cooperatively fighting through waves of the undead as you attempt to reach your own world.

While it can't help but shake that 'budget' feel at every turn, there are at least some interesting ideas teased so far. There's a resource system of sorts in place, where the remains of creatures can be retrieved and harvested as you attempt to 'survive' the whole ordeal. Konami says stealth will play a part, although it's yet to confirm exactly how *Metal Gear*'s traditional sneaking principles will work in a game that's clearly more *Left 4 Dead* than *Snake Eater*.

Kojima himself toyed with the idea of doing a nanomachine-powered zombie sequel to *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* back in 2013, but even with the veteran developer involved the idea seemed a little stale for a series that made its name going against the curve. Here and now, *Metal Gear Survive* feels more like an ill-advised attempt to cash in on a familiar property without contributing anything to its storied legacy.



1 All androids must wear a triangle like this one on their chest, a move from the authorities of Detroit that feels disturbingly close to real historical instances of minority groups or people of lower social status having to wear identifiers.

2 The circle on the right temple of an android is a big giveaway that they are not human. It also appears to change colour and seems to indicate a change in status for the android. For instance, the hostage-taking android Daniel has a red circle.

3 Androids are not supposed to have emotions, which is one of the reasons why Kara appears to be special (if we take the Kara tech demo from 2011 to be canon), but it's a good giveaway that something is wrong if one begins to show signs of it.

# WHAT STORY WILL YOU TELL IN DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN?

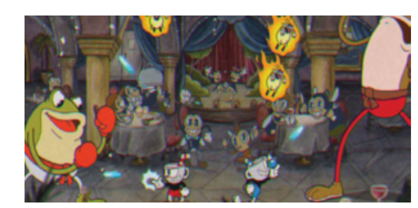
## DAVID CAGE HAS NEVER BEEN MORE CAGE-LIKE

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** FRANCE **PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** QUANTIC DREAM **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

The games of Quantic Dream have proven to be fairly divisive over the years, with some willing to dive into their deep narrative themes and play out the role of director and collaborative story-teller and others rejecting their mechanics as not being real videogames at all, but interactive stories.

However, its seems to us that the establishment of that model through Telltale's titles and Dontnod's *Life Is Strange* has placed David Cage's commitment to this style of game-making at the heart of an established and beloved genre.

And so with *Detroit: Become Human* we get to play out the roles of several android characters, fulfilling their duties as servants of humanity or trying to find some humanity of their own. Each will have their own distinct abilities and story to tell. However, as with previous game *Heavy Rain*, we expect these tales will converge so long as you keep the cast alive to the end. Once again all of your player characters can be killed as part of their story and there is no game over, the tale will continue to a conclusion based on such a circumstance. How many will you keep alive? You'll have to wait and see.



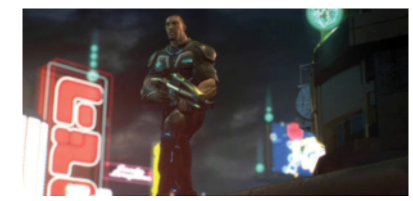
## CUPHEAD

It was sad to see this highly-anticipated indie slip into 2017, but given the way the core game has expanded into a full platformer and how meticulously it is being pieced together, we're more than willing to wait. It's still a massively exciting ID@Xbox title.



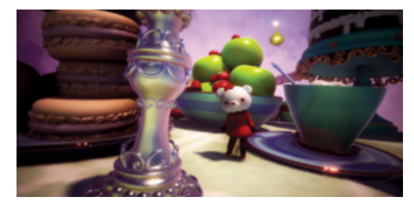
## BELOW

Another much-delayed ID@Xbox release, the Capybara team has seemingly been having some issues getting its roguelike dungeon crawler together. It's looked like a wonderfully dark and challenging experience from the start, so hopefully it will live up to its promise.



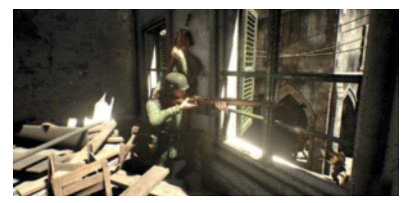
## CRACKDOWN 3

Microsoft has been relatively quiet on this technically ambitious sandbox sequel. With cloud processing intended to supplement the core gameplay, it was promising masses of destruction in an open world. Could Project Scorpio add even more to the equation?



## DREAMS

Media Molecule is still hard at work on its latest creation, hence its absence from E3 in the summer. The potential for creating games and characters in this new experience is massive. And we're still not 100 per cent convinced it won't be VR compatible too.



## BATTALION 1944

Bulkhead has been doing excellent work in the puzzle field with *Pneuma* and *The Turing Test*, but its take on World War II shooters is a real passion project. The team is steeped in early *Call Of Duty* and *Medal Of Honor* gameplay, so expect something in that style.

# 10 THINGS TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

## JUST A FEW IDEAS TO KEEP YOU INTERESTED IN ROCKSTAR'S EXCITING SEQUEL

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE
**ORIGIN:** USA
**PUBLISHER:** ROCKSTAR
**DEVELOPER:** ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO
**RELEASE:** Q3 2017
**PLAYERS:** 1-TBC

### WIDE OPEN WORLD

1 One of the triumphs of *Red Dead Redemption* was applying the open-world freedom of *Grand Theft Auto* to a much more desolate and seemingly empty environment. The lack of buildings or urbanisation actually made *Red Dead* feel even more limitless in its potential.

### LITTLE THINGS TO DO

2 We'll get on to some of the bigger picture stuff in a moment, but for a world that we remember as being relatively empty, *Red Dead Redemption* offered a lot of small things to do, such as hunting, shoot-outs on the road, playing cards or just exploring the huge wilderness.

### A GREAT STORY

3 Trying to match the last game for its narrative is going to be a challenge, because it was one of the best we've encountered in a videogame to date. The tale of redemption that the title implied lived up to expectations and came at a high price. It was wonderfully woven by Rockstar.

### SET PIECES GALORE

4 On top of a quality overarching plot you also have some excellent action set-pieces to help break up the pacing of the game. While *GTA* might have the edge thanks to insane explosives and airborne combat, *Red Dead* offered incredible shootouts in classic Western locations.

### THE RETURN OF DEAD EYE?

5 As one of the key features of the previous game we're very much looking forward to the return of Dead Eye, the slow-motion targeting system, in *Redemption*. It was one of the main reasons why combat on horseback was actually playable and enjoyable, which is more than some Western games can claim.

### GREAT HORSEBACK CONTROL

6 Not only was it fun to get into combat while mounted on a horse, it was enjoyable just to roam the countryside atop a steed as well and that's thanks to some excellent controls and fantastic animation. The muscle definition on horses in *RDR* is still pretty amazing now.








### AMAZING MUSIC

7 The soundtrack to *Red Dead Redemption*, inspired by countless Western films, is one of the all-time great scores to a videogame. We expect no less from Rockstar's sequel, having had plenty of time in the intervening years to put something equally enthralling and atmospheric together.

### SHARED WORLD MULTIPLAYER

8 *RDR* already had an interesting take on multiplayer lobbies with some fun fast-draw mini-games and villages to explore, but we're expecting Rockstar to deliver something closer to *GTA Online* with a persistent map populated by real players and plenty of missions to take on.

### BLASTS FROM THE PAST

9 Rockstar loves its interconnecting threads for its games, often making references to previous releases. With *RDR 2* looking likely to be a prequel, the chances of meeting up with characters we already know well seem high. They may not be as friendly as we remember them…

### ALL THE FUN OF THE WEST

10 As anyone watching *Westworld* has been reminded, the Frontier is a place of violence, adventure and romance so we'll be keeping our fingers crossed for plenty of heists, bounties and narrative threads just begging to be pulled. *Red Dead Redemption 2* has a lot to live up to.

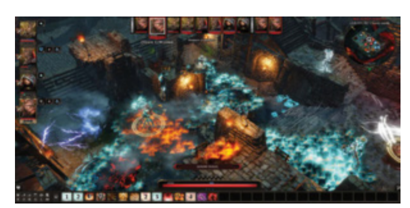






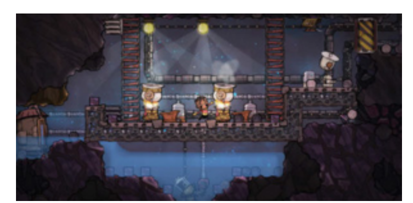
## FUTURE UNFOLDING

With procedurally generated landscapes powering its exploration, *Future Infolding* will be hiding its secrets well and with no obvious combat mechanics you may need to do the same if you want to survive long enough to work out what this world is all about.



## DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

Early access is already showing that this is another excellent RPG from Larian Studios, but one that still too few gamers have taken note of. There's much more customisation in this game as you pick your class, race and whether to play cooperatively with friends or solo.



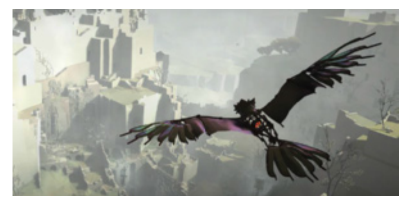
## OXYGEN NOT INCLUDED

From the fantastic minds at Klei Entertainment, we're hoping this colony simulation game can offer the kind of depth and challenge that we rather wanted from *Fallout Shelter*. It certainly looks the part with a fun cartoon style and lots of crafting options.



## VANE

Developed by a team with some former Team Ico experience on its books, *Vane* has the look and feel of a Fumito Ueda game and until recently seemed like it might beat *The Last Guardian* to market. As it stands it's still a fascinating and atmospheric adventure on the way.



## MARE

Not long after *Vane* was announced, one of its Team Ico veterans, Rui Guerreiro, actually left and has re-emerged with a very similar looking, but VR focused, game called *Mare*. He says this is closer to his own personal vision for what *Vane* could have been.

## NEED TO KNOW

*FOR HONOR* IS QUITE OBVIOUSLY MULTIPLAYER FOCUSED, ALTHOUGH IT DOES FEATURE A FULLY-FLEDGED SINGLE-PLAYER CAMPAIGN. WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE UBISOFT TRY TO EXPLAIN THE TIME TRAVELLING WARRIORS AWAY IN A CUTSCENE.

# UBISOFT IS ON THE OFFENSIVE WITH **FOR HONOR**

### DON'T COUNT OUT THIS QUIRKY BRAWLER JUST YET

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** CANADA **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT MONTREAL **RELEASE:** 14 FEB 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-8

If Ubisoft could be accused of anything, it's that its abundance of development studios have a tendency to stuff their biggest and most evolutionary ideas into tired, flaccid templates. This has a far-reaching effect on nearly every triple-A production the publisher has a hand in; from *Assassin's Creed* to *Watch Dogs*, *Far Cry* to *The Crew*. But perhaps it's that very notion that makes *For Honor* feel so fresh and look so liberated from the litany of sequels and copycat products that are coming in 2017.

There is plenty to say about *For Honor*, of course, although most of it diverts attention from its biggest asset – the simple, but innovative fighting mechanics. The historical inaccuracy of European knights, Vikings and samurai warriors engaged in combat simultaneously is simply something you are going to have to get over and get on board with, otherwise you might just miss out on one of the most interesting and engaging new concepts to arrive this generation.

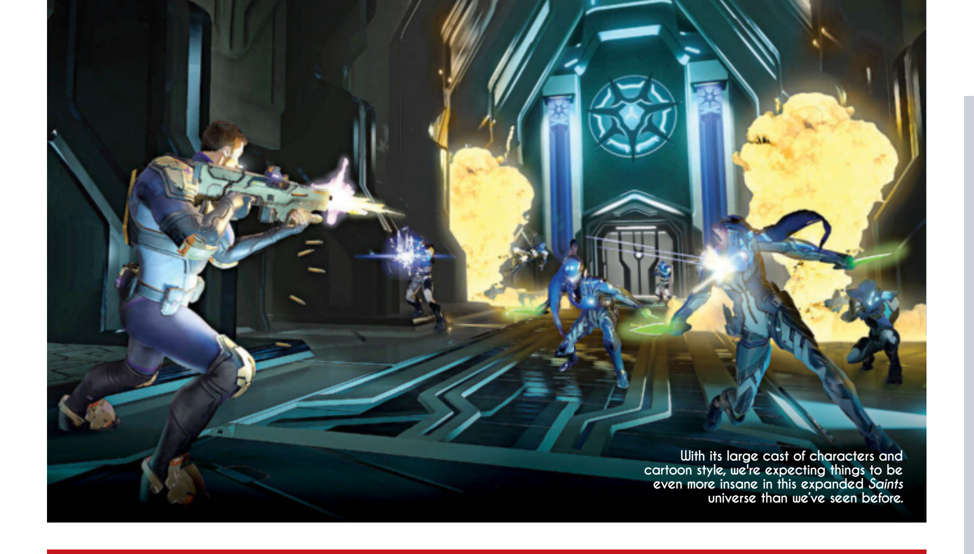
Each of the three factions – and the four classes found within – offer obvious differences in their weapons and abilities, although the basic rules of engagement are always the same. This isn't a big budget *Dynasty Warriors*; there will be no mere hacking and slashing to victory here, folks, as *For Honor*'s combat hinges on reading enemy movement and adjusting your stance and fighting style in real time.

Your stance is everything, which allows you to attack or block in one of three directions. It's simple, but surprisingly deep in its versatility, even giving you the scope to break an enemy's guard or fake them out with swift movements to leave an opening for a devastating flurry of strikes. Thanks to an array of swords, shields and abilities the combat can become complex when facing a skilled opponent – a dance of death as you engage one on one whilst surrounded by tens of AI soldiers fighting over frontline territory – though those basic fighting tenets always remain the same.

Already *For Honor* seems to be a strange mix of influences but, then again, the end result isn't something we have exactly seen before on this scale. As a precision slasher, *For Honor* works just fine, but it's as Ubisoft Montreal combines this gameplay basis with an array of interesting game modes – simple arena style grudge matches, to larger scale situations that take their cues from shooter mainstays such as Conquest and Domination – where it really carves out its own niche. There's nothing quite like *For Honor* on the market. And as budgets continue to spiral higher and higher, a publisher taking a risk should be something worth getting excited about.



BELOW The culture and lore of each of the fighting heroes plays a big in helping to define them and make them feel unique. The knights, samurai and Vikings each have their heritage to uphold.


With its large cast of characters and cartoon style, we're expecting things to be even more insane in this expanded *Saints* universe than we've seen before.

# GETTING TO KNOW THE AGENTS OF MAYHEM

## EVERYTHING WE KNOW ABOUT THE FOUR REVEALED CHARACTERS FROM THIS SAINTS ROW UNIVERSE EXPANSION

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **DEVELOPER:** VOLITION **ORIGIN:** USA **PUBLISHER:** DEEP SILVER **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1



### RAMA

Possibly the agent we know the least about from those that have been officially revealed, this bow-wielding acrobat is the only long-range fighter we know of at present and her background as an immunologist positions her nicely as a medic too. We expect to see a lot more of these kinds of combat class combinations throughout the full agent lineup for this game.

### HARDTACK

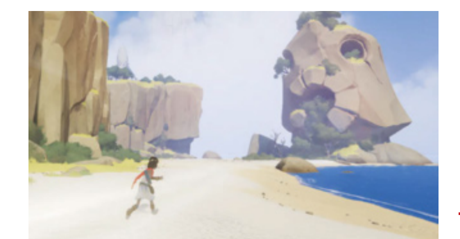
Occupying that all-important tank slot in the M.A.Y.H.E.M. crew, Hardtack may look like a pirate with this eye patch and mechanical hand, but he's actually a naval man, bringing some much needed discipline to the group. We expect there to be at least one more tank type in your 12 selectable agent options, but this tough-talking seaman is a good place to start.

### FORTUNE

Tapping into a futuristic sky pirate theme that Volition seems to be having fun with, this Colombian rogue brings a lot of tech knowledge along with her short-range energy pistols. She carries around a drone called Glory that can be used as a signature attack weapon. We're expecting her tech background to offer some hacking gameplay options too.

### HOLLYWOOD

The classic dim-witted face hero with a fistful of medium range weapons, medium level defenses and medium level humour. In fact there's every chance that his ego is the only elevated thing about him. That said, his special ability that sees the world exploding around him in a Michael Bay fashion is a rather fun idea. You'll probably pick him for your team just in case.



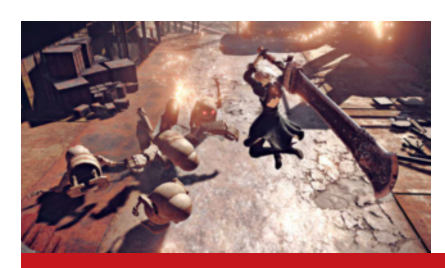
# RIME

## THE EXPLORATION SIM IS STILL ALIVE

**FORMAT:** PS4, TBC **ORIGIN:** SPAIN **DEVELOPER:** TEQUILA WORKS **PUBLISHER:** SIX FOOT/ GREY BOX **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

After more than five years in development, the former Sony-exclusive *Rime* is edging closer to an actual release. With its bright, Wind Waker-esque coastal setting and platforming heavy gameplay reminiscent of the equally long-gestating *The Last Guardian*, the indie title promises to be one of 2017's most intriguing prospects.

Developer Tequila Works has swollen its ranks with staff from the likes of MercurySteam, Blizzard and Weta Digital, and you can see that pedigree shining through with the vibrancy of its open island setting and the environmental puzzles that look to have a familiar *Ico* flavour. However, things have been awfully quiet over the last year on the *Rime* front, but Tequila Works has assured fans that the game is still incoming in 2017.



# NIER: AUTOMATA

## THE ACTION-RPG SPIN OFF RETURNS

**FORMAT:** PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PLAYERS:** 1 **DEVELOPER:** PLATINUMGAMES **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

It's been six years since *NieR*, and after all that time it seemed destined for that corner of the medium resigned for games that don't sell well but attain cult status anyway. Well, would you believe it, *NieR* is getting a sequel.

Set in the same wasteland as the previous games, you're now in the shoes of war-grizzled android 2B. With Platinum's pedigree in pacey action infusing *Automata*'s gameplay with an almost *Devil May Cry* flavour, that means you're getting a much faster kind of gunplay and brutal melee sprinkled across an open world. The story of androids fighting machine invaders does sound a little rote, but *NieR* and its forbears have always come up trumps in the narrative department.




# ASSEMBLE THE OFFENSIVE IN SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE

THE KING OF MODERN REAL-TIME STRATEGY RETURNS WITH AN OLD-SCHOOL MINDSET

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** USA
**PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT SAN FRANCISCO, SOUTH PARK DIGITAL
**RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

Sometimes all you need is a game where you can lob farts like grenades and offend practically every denomination on the planet. That's what 2014's *The Stick Of Truth* gave us, a breath of ass-scented air in a genre that had taken itself seriously for far too long, and its sequel looks to carry on that irreverence into 2017.

Picking up where its fantasy-focused predecessor left off, the infantile population of South Park, Colorado find themselves in a cosplay-heavy civil war as Cartman and co dress up as superheroes and attempt to out offend one another like a boxset of Frankie Boyle DVDs. From the offset it looks like *The Fractured But Whole* isn't deviating too far from the template, with a similar open world to explore and a turn-based battle system.

However, that doesn't mean new developer Ubisoft San Francisco (taking over from Obsidian's memorable work on the original) isn't adding a new dimension to the *South Park* action-RPG. *TSOT*'s own combat model simplified its combat to make the genre seem a little more accessible, but it also made fights a little too easy to navigate, so *TFBW* adds in a *Banner Saga*-style grid system that enables you to move your party of sweary minors into better tactical positions. Battles aren't just static hit exchanges now, but far more rewarding as your party works more like a squad.

The paltry four character classes of *TSOT* has been upgraded to suit the new Marvel/DC-aping schtick of its sequel, with a total of 12 new types now at the disposal of the returning New Kid (including Brutalist, Blaster, Speedster, Elementalist, Gadgeteer, Mystic, Cyborg, Psychic, Assassin, Commander, Netherborn and Karate Kid). There's even the choice to select the gender of your character. Who said Matt and Trey couldn't be progressive *and* offensive, eh?





# THE THREE PILLARS OF YOOKA-LAYLEE

PLAYTONIC BRINGS A MAGIC TOUCH TO ITS INDIE BLOCKBUSTER

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** UK **PUBLISHER:** TEAM17
**DEVELOPER:** PLAYTONIC GAMES **RELEASE:** MARCH 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1

## PASSION PERSONIFIED

1 In combining a team made up largely of former-Rare employees who desperately wanted to deliver a new *Banjo*-style experience and backed by the crowdfunding cash of fans who wanted to see that happen too, *Yooka-Laylee* is a project full of love for 3D platforming. Out of that comes a cast of characters who are quick to quip and are full of life.

## NOSTALGIA EVOLVED

2 The toughest balancing act for *Yooka-Laylee* is in bringing a classic 3D platforming experience into the modern era without it feeling like a throwback. From what we've seen and played so far, Playtonic has done an impressive job of modernising mechanics of the genre to feel much tighter and more polished than *Banjo* games of old.

## SECRETS HIDDEN

3 If the teasing demo that backers of *Yooka-Laylee* got to enjoy is any indication (and we believe it very much was) then this is a game that's going to be packed full of discoverable items and elements, in-jokes and side amusements. The gameplay areas themselves are bigger than anything we've seen from the *Banjo* series, so who knows what could be out there?



Sony Santa Monica has ditched the fixed camera positioning of old and replaced it with an over-the-shoulder camera, bringing *God Of War* in line with other third-person brawlers.

# THE GODS OF GOD OF WAR

## WHO WILL KRATOS BE PUTTING HIS FIST THROUGH THIS TIME? LET'S DIVE INTO NORSE MYTHOLOGY TO FIND OUT

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** USA **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1
**PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** SIE SANTA MONICA STUDIO

Kratos is all grown up. He enacted his vengeance against the Olympian Gods and put his rage behind him. Think about it, tearing powerful gods and monsters apart limb by limb (and we mean that literally, by the way) is going to tire out even the best of us – *yes*, even the god of war. Sometimes you just need a little family time to get a grasp on your priorities. Kratos has settled down with his son in a new era of mythology, living amongst the Norse gods and monsters of old. Sony Santa Monica might be trying to paint a more thoughtful premise here – showcasing a narrative spanning the struggles of parenthood – but we all know how this is going to go. It won't be long before narrative ambitions go out the window, Kratos gets pissed and starts putting his foot through skulls. Here are a few of the Norse gods we expect to be murdering come winter 2017.

### ODIN

1 Zeus is long gone and so a new figure needs to step up and into the public enemy number one position. It'll quite obviously be Odin, as he's essentially head of the table when it comes to Norse mythology. He might be all-seeing, all-powerful and all-knowing, but let's see how he handles a force of nature like Kratos.

### LOKI

3 Loki has always been regarded as a trickster, which presents a handful of interesting gameplay opportunities. Kratos won't be able to rely on brute force, but instinct and wit. If Sony is intent on pushing the boundaries of *God Of War*, then a puzzle-centric battle could expand the game's remit.

### FREYJA

5 Once Kratos gets started, there's often very little that can stop him. That all said, he hasn't faced an enemy quite as formidable as Freyja, the godess of battle. She's as bloodthirsty as Kratos; what better way is there to prove your strength than taking out the illusive god of war?

### THOR

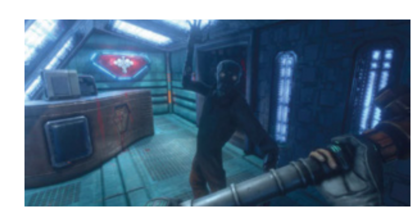
2 Traditionally, sons have a pretty torrid time in *God Of War*. That's why we are wholly expecting the mighty god of thunder – the most famous of the Norse gods – to make an appearance. Powerful, handsome and wielding a mighty hammer, it's a match-up made in heaven.

### TYR

4 Tyr presents something of an interesting conundrum. Despite being the original god of war – the ruler before Odin appeared on the scene – he is often forgotten. Were he to make an appearance (in either a cameo or boss form) it would be entertaining to see the two gods of war square up to one another.

### BALDR

6 Kratos doesn't discriminate, if something is standing in his way it is likely to be murdered – even the god of peace. Baldr is loyal to his family and any slight against Odin (or his line) is likely to catch his eye. He might be peaceful by nature, but he hides a blind fury to match Kratos' own.



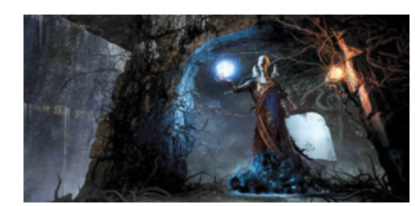
## SYSTEM SHOCK

We've played a little of this remake of the original Looking Glass game and we were very impressed with how the spirit of the title was being maintained despite the drastic shift in graphical quality. And it's no less creepy than the original either.



## FARPOINT

We're very excited to see this FPS game land on PSVR, not least because it launches with the PlayStation VR Aim controller, which adds so much additional immersion to the experience. The core shooting is tight, if a little generic, but still very fun.



## THE BARD'S TALE IV

It's great to see InXile continue its streak of resurrected classic RPGs, having already brought *Wasteland* back and now taking a stab at this legendary role-player. Expect party-based, single-player exploration and combat that bridges the gap between old and new.



## FAR: LONE SAILS

There's a nice retro feel to *Far*, but it's not really based on any pre-existing gameplay idea, it just has that feel. With a mix of *Journey*, *Never Alone* and *Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime*, you must maintain your vehicle on its journey through a decimated landscape.



## STATIK

Alongside its work on *Little Nightmares*, Tarsier Studios is working on this very fun-looking VR game that locks your hands in a puzzle box that needs to be solved. There's a nice Aperture Science feel to the location, too, which is always a delight.

# GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS IS UBISOFT'S MOST CUSTOMISABLE GAME TO DATE

## UBISOFT IS BRINGING FREEDOM AND FLEXIBILITY TO TOM CLANCY

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** FRANCE
**PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT PARIS
**RELEASE:** 7 MARCH 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-4

On the surface, there's very little about *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* that looks faithful, be that to the series' past successes or the Tom Clancy branding it has worn faithfully from 2001. Look a little deeper though, and you might just find a series threatening to redefine and refine the tactical shooter genre all over again. We no longer live in an age where a co-op focused shooter can be just *one* thing – it needs to cater to a variety of different players and play styles if it hopes to find any success.

*Wildlands* is the first *Ghost Recon* game set in a fully open world, pushing a focus onto reactive, high-octane missions across a simulated Bolivia, in which you'll be able to traverse and ravage 11 different ecosystems. How you play is up to you and your friends (or just you, should you so choose), with the game and its missions open to interpretation and manipulation. Ubisoft Paris has designed *Wildlands* as its largest and most customisable *Tom Clancy* game ever, letting you truly have the freedom to tackle it as you want to. Want to play it slow and tactically like the glory days of *Ghost Recon*? Have at it, there's a sniper rifle and suppressor at the supply drop. Prefer to roll in with a truck full of explosives and turn Bolivia into a realm of pure chaos? You can do that too, though you should probably plan an escape route ahead of time – just because it has become more flexible doesn't mean it is any easier.



## WEAPON TEARDOWN

1 Gunsmith is returning after its debut in 2012's *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*. It's a gameplay element that allows you to fully break apart and build back up your own custom firearm in 3D. *Wildlands* features a similar mode for its 50 customisation weapons and offers over 100 attachments too; the idea being that squads can quickly and intricately prepare for a mission ahead of time, kitting themselves out with the necessary tools to properly succeed in a mission.

## FULLY CUSTOMISABLE

2 Ubisoft is eager to let you create your own unique operative, allowing you to customise 12 elements on your Ghost – from gender, to hats, to glasses and tattoos – from the outset, but you also need to blend in with your surroundings. This flexibility will then allow you to balance the ratio of authentic military gear with standard camouflage and local attire. After all, you wouldn't want the Santa Blanca drug cartel being alerted to your presence by civilians, now would you?

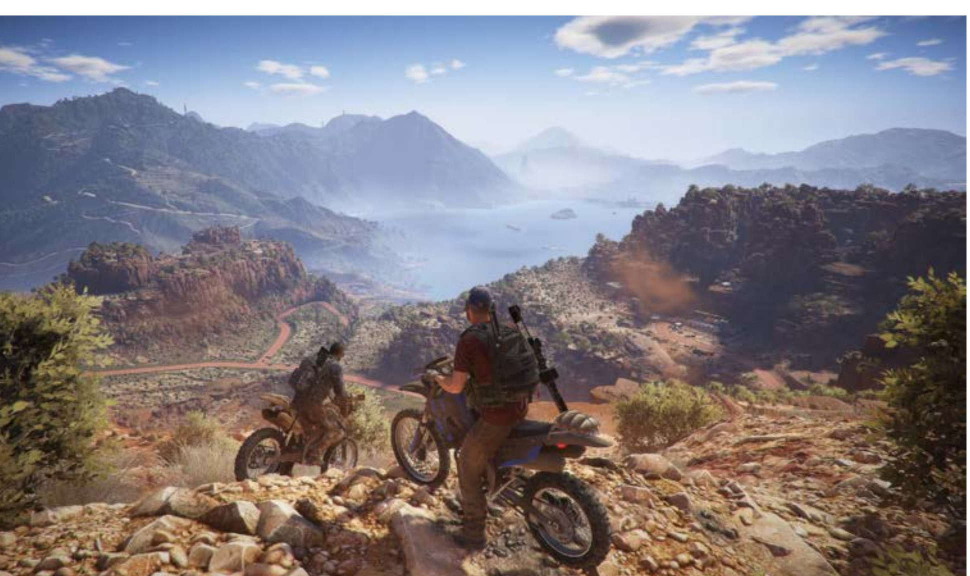
## PLAY YOUR WAY

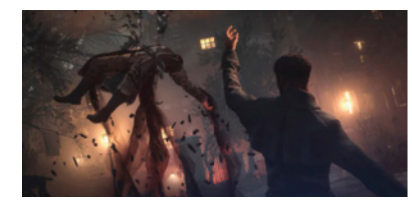
3 *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* might be Ubisoft's biggest and most impressive open world to date, but it's also built for personable play. *The Division* was engrossing, but it rarely felt as if you were having any impact on the streets around you. Ubisoft Paris is promising that won't be the case here, as the game has been built in such a way as that it supports flexible play styles and focuses on freedom of choice above all else.

## CLASSIC GHOST RECON?

4 *Wildlands* is going to be the tenth instalment in the *Ghost Recon* franchise, acting as a soft reboot of sorts. The reliance on slow, tactical build-up seems to have disappeared, as too has the military and technology fetishism from the *Advanced Warfare* era, so what are we left with? A game that wants to be a little bit of everything – *Wildlands* has been built in such a way that you can, in theory, tackle missions and the world in any fashion that you want to.

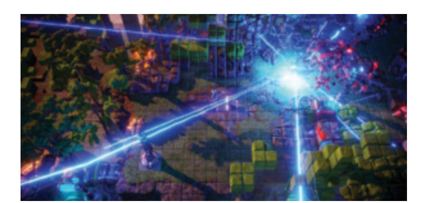
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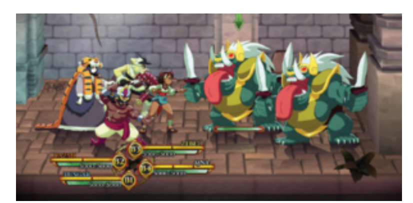
## VAMPYR

After the incredible success of *Life Is Strange* all eyes are on Dontnod to deliver another gripping story with *Vampyr*, although the tone of this game will be vastly different. The key will be your decision to succumb to the vampiric nature of your character or survive by other means.



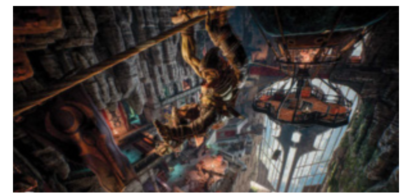
## NEX MACHINA

A new bullet hell piece of madness from the maker of *Resogun*, Housemarque, this new shooter also boasts the expertise of legendary *Smash TV* and *Robotron: 2084* developer Eugene Jarvis. The result of their collaboration is another very exciting PS4 exclusive.



## INDIVISIBLE

As Lab Zero Games looks to do for the RPG what its previous game, *Skullgirls*, did for fighters, we're really looking forward to this more irreverent but still challenging and engaging take on the genre. The animations are gorgeous as well.



## STYX: SHARDS OF DARKNESS

With a pretty decent opening release this generation, we're rather looking forward to getting our hands on another goblin stealth-action game. With gameplay that feels like classic *Thief* in a fantasy realm, there's a lot to enjoy with *Styx*.



## GET EVEN

Thanks to some impressive scanning tech The Farm 51 has built some very detailed and realistic locations for this fascinating first-person game. It kind of looks like *Condemned* for a new generation, which is fine by us. We need to see a little more, though.



Expect the Cinematic Universe to influence which characters join the roster on the Marvel side, but not necessarily dictate their designs in-game.

# THE PROS AND CONS OF MARVEL VS CAPCOM INFINITE

**ARE WE BEING TAKEN FOR A RIDE? WE MEASURE UP FOUR OF THE KEY CHANGES**

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-2

## TWO-ON-TWO

**+** For the more casual player or viewer, one fewer playable character per team is going to make the action a lot easier to follow. It also means fewer characters to learn, less interplay and situational combos to master and more chance to get your two-character team really working as a unit.

**–** A lot of *MvC*'s appeal comes from its sheer spectacle, and it's hard to argue that some of that isn't lost in a two-on-two environment. It also reduces the amount of possibilities for crazy combos, meaning that powerful combinations of moves and characters are likely to come to the fore that much quicker. Less chance to rep your favourite heroes, too!

## NO X-MEN?

**+** It's probably about time for a bit of a shake-up when it comes to mutants. Magneto and Storm have both been high-tier staples thanks to their insane mobility, so it'll be nice to see some new faces in key roles. All is not lost, either – reports suggest *X-Men* characters may miss launch but follow later as DLC.

**–** A *Vs* series game without Wolverine almost feels like a *Street Fighter* game without Ryu. He's been a mainstay since way back in the *Children Of The Atom* days and as much as we may not like using him, he'll be missed. Marvel's spat with Fox really could put a dent in the game's launch roster, but we'll keep everything crossed.

Ryu, Mega Man X, Iron Man and Captain Marvel star in the CG reveal trailer, while Captain America and Morrigan (no, Capcom hasn't used *that* sprite, sadly) were shown off in new gameplay after the Capcom Cup finals

## INFINITY GEMS

**+** What we've seen suggests something similar functionally to *MvC3*'s X-Factor mechanic – a once-per-battle boost only here with perks tied to the pre-selected gem of choice. X-Factor was awesome for showboating cancels and chip damage prevention, and only fell down in terms of balancing, something Capcom will need to be even more careful of now it has multiple variants.

**–** The problem with X-Factor was that it made 'touch of death' combos, where landing *any* hit could lead to a full, inescapable string that KOs your opponent. The fear with the new system is that it could do exactly the same, or worse. What's to stop a heavy-hitting character abusing a Power gem for silly damage, or a speedy character using the Time power to rattle out a pseudo-infinite combo? Cause for concern, certainly, so balance will indeed be key.

## NO ASSISTS

**+** If the words 'hidden missiles' make you shudder, the omission of assists from playable characters is probably up there with your favourite design decisions ever made. It's another step towards a more streamlined, accessible fighter, and there's nothing to say that a similar system to earlier games – where additional 'striker' characters can be chosen to dash in temporarily – won't yet be added to the game.

**–** For the hardcore, this sits alongside the downscaling from three-on-three as the most gutting news. Clever use of assists gave defensive options to characters that didn't have them and set up countless combos that wouldn't otherwise be possible, making more team combos viable. *Infinite* desperately needs *something* that adds a similar layer of strategy and depth, or else it could end up feeling quite flat.

## VERDICT

It's too early to call with any degree of accuracy, but we're quietly optimistic for *Infinite*. Fighting games tend to change quite a lot between builds, so we're hoping to see some great new characters, a few familiar faces and some interesting new mechanics to replace the ones we've lost in the coming months.



# STAR TREK: BRIDGE CREW TAKES VR CROSS-PLATFORM

## WHATEVER YOUR VR HEADSET, UBISOFT WANTS YOU INVOLVED

**FORMAT:** PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** USA **RELEASE:** 14 MAR 2017
**PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT **PLAYERS:** 1-4

One of the biggest challenges and concerns for developers looking to work in the VR space is that it's even more broken up than the console and PC market in terms of the technology involved and the technical benchmarks of each. No wonder, then, that Ubisoft has announced that all of its VR titles, including *Star Trek: Bridge Crew*, will be cross platform, allowing HTC Vive, Oculus Rift and PlayStation VR players to more easily find players to share these virtual worlds with.

For this *Star Trek* experience, that's going to be particularly helpful as putting together a four-person bridge crew on one VR format was always going to be tough. Whatever your VR headset of choice, you'll now be able to get a team together, take on your roles on the bridge of the Starfleet vessel Aegis and begin your adventures through the final frontier. As we understand you will be confronted with hostile forces and when your ship is attacked, you might well find crew members knocked out by damage taken on the ship. Whoever winds up in the captain's chair may find there's a lot more to do than simply barking orders at everyone under such circumstances.

This sort of simulation seems like such a good fit for a VR game, not just because of the sci-fi setting, but the nature of it too. Taking up your seats on the bridge of a starship is exactly the kind of stationary experience that VR excels at on every platform. It doesn't need full-room tracking or insane resolutions in order to be convincing and immersive. The tricky bit might be nailing down communication between players and devices, but we're excited to see how it all works.




■ We've seen all sorts of character models on the bridge of this game, so picking your officer seems likely. No signs of alien races with Starfleet just yet, but that might be something we see further down the line.

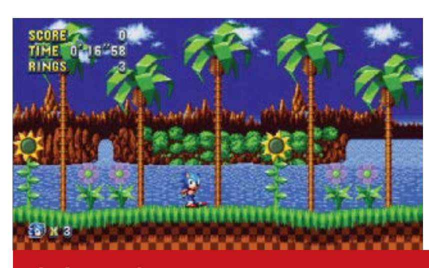


# THE ESCAPISTS 2

## JUST WHEN WE THOUGHT WE WERE OUT, THEY PULLED US BACK IN

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** UK
**PUBLISHER:** TEAM 17 **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-4
**DEVELOPER:** MOULDY TOOF STUDIOS

No one is messing around with the formula for this sequel to the small indie sim that had a massive impact. *The Escapists* was a wonderfully addictive and challenging game so all of the core gameplay ideas are returning. You're in jail and you need to get out by any means you can devise. There's a nice graphical upgrade, but the pixel art style holds firm and we'll now be able to make our escape plans with other players. Co-op and versus multiplayer both online and locally should open up some interesting new scenarios for us all and even more replay value as if crafting new plans wasn't reason enough to keep playing.




# SONIC MANIA

## FAN POWER COULD MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE HERE

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** USA
**PLAYERS:** 1 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA **RELEASE:** Q2 2017
**DEVELOPER:** HEADCANNON, PAGODAWEST GAMES

We can tell you having played a little *Sonic Mania* earlier in the year that this is everything fans of classic *Sonic* gaming could ask for. Driven by a development team that has emerged from the modding community and cut its teeth working on iOS ports of the original games, you can tell it has been pieced together by people who know these games backwards and forwards. Over the years it has seemed as if fans had a very different idea of what they wanted from a new *Sonic* game compared to Sega and this might finally be the answer to that disparity. With Sonic, Tails and Knuckles all playable and classic stages revisited, *Sonic Mania* is looking like a masterstroke already.





# RESIDENT EVIL VII: BIOHAZARD HAS REDISCOVERED ITS IDENTITY

**WE SPENT FOUR HOURS INSIDE CAPCOM'S BOLD NEW HOUSE OF HORRORS, BUT IS IT REALLY THE GRAND RETURN TO FORM THAT THE DEMOS WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE?**

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **RELEASE:** 24 JAN 2017
**PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PLAYERS:** 1

In time, each and every one of us will be forced to confront our fears; overwhelmed by consternation we shall dig deeply to circumvent the horror that stands before us. It is only in these moments – in the presence of circumstances of real terror – that we are able to stretch our capabilities beyond that of what we understand of ourselves. We dig deep and we learn, we adapt and we fight – not because we want to, but because we have to. In *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard*'s dilapidated house of horrors you will have to fight, because there is no solace to be found in the shadows, no comfort in the muted, maelstrom of darkness. To yield here is to invite a fate far worse than death; it is, as they say, the devil that you know that is better than the devil you don't.

We don't look to make this claim lightly, but *Resident Evil VII* feels closer to the 1996 original than anything that has preceded it. **games™** has spent four hours enjoying the twisted hospitality of the Baker family in a near-final build of the game, ahead of its launch on 24 January. Darting between claustrophobic crawlspaces and corridors in search of escape, constantly finding ourselves face-to-face with an evil that we do not understand or recognise is thrilling, in a way the franchise hasn't been for such a very long time. There are no Zombies, Ganados or Majini to be found here and no familiar faces to be seen; this is Capcom spinning *Resident Evil* in a way that you've never seen it before, but always dreamed it.

> "RESIDENT EVIL VII IS QUIETER, WEIRDER AND SMALLER THAN ANYTHING THAT HAS COME IN RECENT MEMORY"

*Resident Evil* is a series that has always been in flux, after all – transitioning from survival-horror to traditional action as the decades wore on – although it seems as if Capcom has finally rediscovered a comfortable rhythm of suspense and stilted action. Trapped within by the dirty, grimy walls of the Baker Estate, horror has come home, its sprawling web of interconnected corridors will immediately recall nightmarish visions of time spent surviving the Spencer Mansion 20 years ago.

Yet, here we find a game that isn't attempting to appease either group of fans. It is seeking only to reclaim its identity and strike forward in an alarming direction, embracing new ideas and themes whilst leaning on what made the series so beloved to begin with. *Resident Evil VII* forces you to confront your fears through the eyes of a weary protagonist – Ethan Winters, a desperate man in over his head as he goes off in search of his wife – and the only recourse is to step directly into the abyss, surrendering yourself to the madness that is being pushed upon your senses.

As its core, *Resident Evil VII* is built on a familiar foundation – that same that came to define the original game – a wild blend of exploration, backtracking, combat and puzzle solving. The shift towards a first-person perspective actually lends itself to the form better than you might expect, and is a smart change that compliments the themes of the game. By the camera's very nature, your field of vision is limited, while your turning speed is slow and purposeful. It feels like a careful iteration of the tank controls that so many fans have becoming blindingly beholden to through the whims of nostalgia, ensuring that Ethan is as clueless and surprised by the terrors lurking around each and every corner as we are.

Can the jump scares be cheap? Oh, you better believe they can be, but no more so than the famous encounter with the dogs in the L-shaped hallway all those years ago. *Resident Evil VII* is effective at building tension, and we weren't even playing in VR; lord knows what terrors await those that are brave enough to strap themselves in for the full ride.

While much of the advertising campaign and public demonstrations, such as the *Beginning Hour* demo (now readily available across PS4 and Xbox One), have focused solely on exploration, our playthrough gave us a taste of everything *Resident Evil VII* has to offer. Superficial similarities to the past will quickly make themselves known: limited inventory space, green herbs to replenish your health, sparse ammunition, specific save rooms, the ability to combine items and an arsenal of weapons that seem to mirror that of the original game (it wasn't long before a knife, handgun, shotgun, flamethrower and grenade launcher were either in our hands or just out of reach, protected by an array of obtuse puzzles or locks).

And yet, even with so many weapons vying for a place in your inventory space, the game never struggles in making you feel entirely overwhelmed and helpless. Take the opening hour, in which Jack, the family man himself, stalks you relentlessly around the estate's claustrophobic corridors. If he spots Ethan he will charge, wielding an array of oversized and deadly garden shed items, and there is no real defence against him. We aren't going to lie, it's pretty terrifying – like the introduction of a faster, deadlier, smarter (and slightly handsomer) Nemesis. He'll smash through walls, leap out from behind corners while screaming and he will never stop coming for you, the only thing you can do is run. Headshots will merely slow him down, his body flinching and recoiling from the heavy, powerful sounding shots of your pistol but never will they stop him completely.

There are plenty of instances of this, of characters with supernatural strength or abilities running you in circles, though we are hesitant to veer into spoiler territory – discovering these horrors for yourself is half of the fun. The game has a habit of constantly finding new twists to keep the situation unsettling, new ways to bend the narrative to create a constant source of tension. You'll rarely feel comfortable. It's a draining but effective source of fun. Uncertainty is Capcom's biggest tool here and the game delights in pushing the controller out of your hands or your arse out of the seat as the various horrors of the family estate make themselves known one by one.

Because of all of this, *Resident Evil VII* does – at least in its earliest hours – feel like a smart, big-budgeted overhaul of the structure presented in the likes of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Outlast* and, yes, *PT.* You'll spend a hell of a lot of time clinging to shadows, sneaking between rooms and generally doing your best to stay out of sight. It's effective at evoking an emotional response, sure, but is it *Resident Evil*? Thankfully, Capcom has filled this locale with a variety of absurd puzzles and ridiculous traps – which is just how we like it. You'll need to locate decorative keys, attach counterweights to camouflaged levers; one objective will send you off in search of three hidden dog heads, while another will see you rotating a carved statue to cast a specific silhouette on a painting. "Who builds this shit?" Ethan will groan aloud, asking himself a question that you have no doubt asked yourself at one time or another while playing these games. You'll be pleased to know that the self-referential and deprecating humour of *Resident Evil* is still alive and well – even if the voice acting is now much improved.

*Resident Evil VII* is, at its core, a survival-horror game. But that doesn't mean Capcom

"THE SELF-REFERENTIAL AND DEPRECATING HUMOUR OF RESIDENT EVIL IS STILL ALIVE AND WELL"



## TURN YOUR LIGHTS OFF. . .

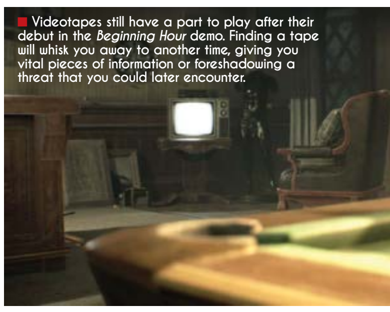
### …AND KEEP THE SOUND UP

A big part of *Resident Evil VII*'s success stems from the sound and visual design. There is a distinct lack of music to be found, with the game instead happy to focus on noises born from the unsettling environment. The Baker Estate is old and creaky, it bends to the wind – not to mention the relentless pursuit of the Baker family – and it creates a constant feeling of dread, an unsettling atmosphere to spend any time in. The light will betray you, forcing you to stop dead in your tracks. Noises will have you spinning frantically only to discover that nothing was ever there. If the entire *Resident Evil VII* experience holds up to this four-hour vertical slice, then we're all about to discover one of the finest settings for a horror videogame ever.



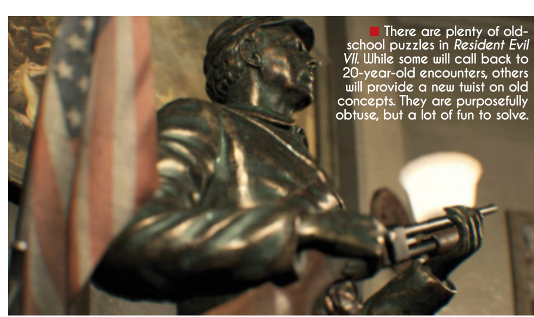
Eventually you may come across a location where you can purchase upgrades to help aid you in combat, though they require hidden Ancient Coins to unlock.





Videotapes still have a part to play after their debut in the *Beginning Hour* demo. Finding a tape will whisk you away to another time, giving you vital pieces of information or foreshadowing a threat that you could later encounter.





There are plenty of old-school puzzles in *Resident Evil VII*. While some will call back to 20-year-old encounters, others will provide a new twist on old concepts. They are purposefully obtuse, but a lot of fun to solve.




The Molded are horrible additions to *Resident Evil*, and we say that in the best possible way. They are twisted, mutated creatures – victims of some unknown evil. A headshot will do the job, otherwise you'll need to dismember them entirely to stop them coming for you.

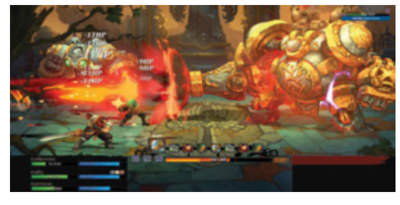



is leaving action fans out the lurch either. Fast-forward a few hours and we are having our first encounters with the Molded, a brand-new enemy type that crawl out of the shadows; they move with the purpose of Hunters, although their maws of teeth and thick, black tar-like substance skin makes for a more formidable, terrifying threat. Combat options are limited – you can quick turn, there's a guard button to help mitigate damage and you can pull the left-trigger to assist with tighter aiming – but for the most part using your weapon should be considered a last resort.

The weapons feel fantastic to wield. Powerful and dominating, the sound of a shot echoes out through the corridors, though the impact they have is nominal. The Molded will continue to stride before you, with shots tearing through their bodies but never their resolve – a perfectly placed headshot will bring them to the floor and it's oh, so satisfying to pull off. While it's difficult to know just how big combat and stealth systems will play into the full, final game, we were impressed by the variety on show in the opening hours. Capcom has suggested that the four hours we've played make up about a third of the game, and if that's representative of the pacing for the full product then we should be in for a treat.

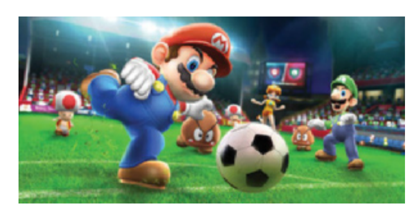
Much like the original *Resident Evil*, the more time you spend investigating and searching – pushing your fear aside as you creep into unsettling new territories – the more the game will reward you. Plenty of doors will open up giving you better access to the entire mansion, specific keys can only be found in other areas of the sprawling backwater Louisiana premises and those willing to return will be the ones rewarded. It's difficult to say with what: more scares, more puzzles or perhaps even upgrades or better weaponry. Some of the best weapons are hidden behind puzzles, some in the traditional sense, while others (including upgrades to your health or reload speed) are locked behind cages that require special coins to gain access to – only those with an eye for environmental discovery will find all of these.

Ultimately, it's fun being caught in the maze of *Resident Evil* all over again. With the franchise's shift towards action it lost much of its fear factor, but it also lost its complexity; maps became linear to foster bigger engagements, puzzles took a backseat to bigger battles, while subtlety and nuance was thrown out for big personalities in the likes of Chris Redfield and Leon S Kennedy. *Resident Evil VII* is quieter, weirder and smaller than anything that has come in recent memory, but it is exactly what Capcom has spent the last decade trying to do. It's the happy marriage of survival-horror and action, in a way that makes sense for the series. How this will play out across the entire adventure, well, it's hard to know for certain. But we were constantly surprised, scared and intrigued by what we found in *Resident Evil VII*. It is a circus of warped horrors, masterful pacing and very real fear – we couldn't ask for much more from it.



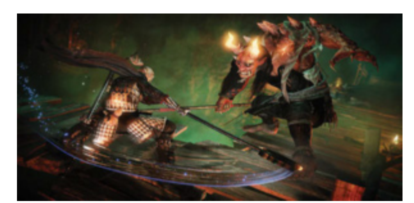
## BATTLE CHASERS: NIGHTWAR

Based on the truncated fantasy comic series and lead by the original artist and writer Joe Madureira (who also headed up *Darksiders*), *Battle Chasers* is a throwback to classic turn-based RPG combat and dungeon exploration with some gorgeous art.



## MARIO SPORTS SUPERSTARS

In a bold move from Nintendo we're getting a sports game anthology collection rather than standalone tennis, football, baseball, golf and… horse racing games. Given that all feature tournaments and multiplayer, this could be a bargain if it delivers.



## NIOH

Finally making an appearance after years in the dark, *Nioh* is getting some very positive comparisons to *Dark Souls* already and, based on our beta access, we would say they're justified. This samurai demon slaying action title is tough as nails.



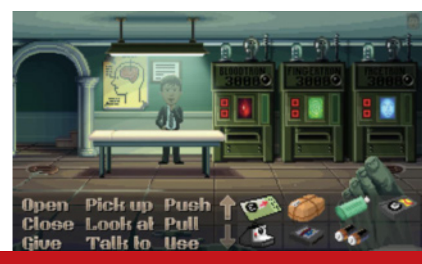
## NI NO KUNI II

Level-5 is getting another stab at translating the wonderful world of Studio Ghibli into RPG form, but this time the scale is far more impressive than the original. Hopefully it will be at least as enjoyable the second time around and get the attention it deserves.



## EITR

We've been keeping a very close eye on this pixel art action game with its dark and moody atmosphere and beautifully smooth combat animations. There's a little *Dark Souls* flavour here, but really it feels wholly original. This is in our top five indies to watch.

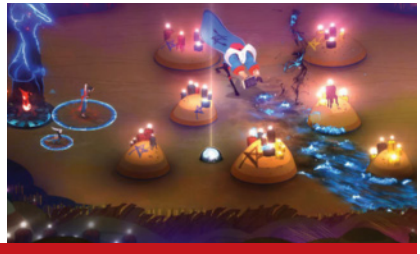



# THIMBLEWEED PARK

STRAIGHT OUT OF THE POINT-AND-CLICK ARCHIVES

**FORMAT:** PS4, XBOX ONE, PC, IOS **ORIGIN:** USA
**PUBLISHER:** TERRIBLE TOYBOX **RELEASE:** JAN 2017
**DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PLAYERS:** 1

Hope hasn't been lost yet that Ron Gilbert might be able to buy the rights to *Monkey Island* back from Disney sometime in the future, but in the meantime he's free, along with fellow adventure game veteran Gary Winnick, to recreate the heyday of the genre with something that can take advantage of all the power and advancements of modern consoles and PCs. *Thimbleweed Park* feels like a spiritual successor to *Maniac Mansion* in more than just its graphical style. There's a logic and humour to its progression and puzzles that frankly got a little muddled by its contemporaries back in the Nineties. This *X-Files* and *Twin Peaks* inspired tale already looks incredible.



# PYRE

THE PARTY RPG IS STARTING TO GET COMPETITIVE

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** USA **PLAYERS:** 1-2
**PUBLISHER:** SUPERGIANT GAMES
**DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

The idea of an action-RPG where the battles almost play out like a mix of *Rocket League* and *Transistor* was exciting enough as Supergiant Games builds on a weird and wonderful concept for a new kind of role-playing experience, but now we know multiplayer is joining the party. More specifically the battle system will be available as a separate local multiplayer experience, which is fantastic news. Through the solo campaign you act as a 'reader' for a band of exiles in purgatory, learning the lore of the land and managing their stats as well as controlling the team in battles when they meet fellow exiles. And of course, it's as gorgeous as any Supergiant title.

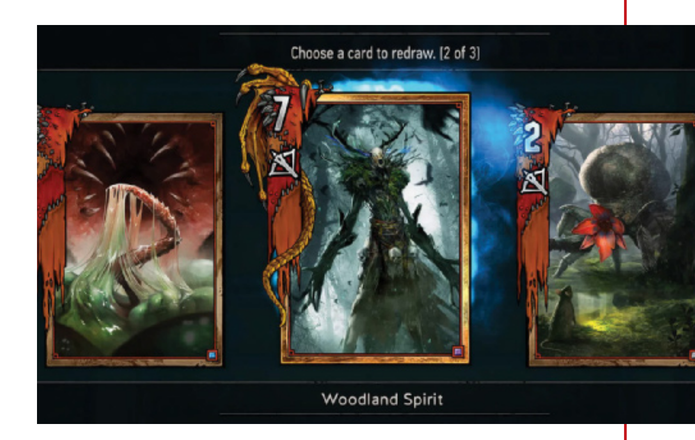
# 3 THINGS THAT SET GWENT: THE WITCHER CARD GAME APART

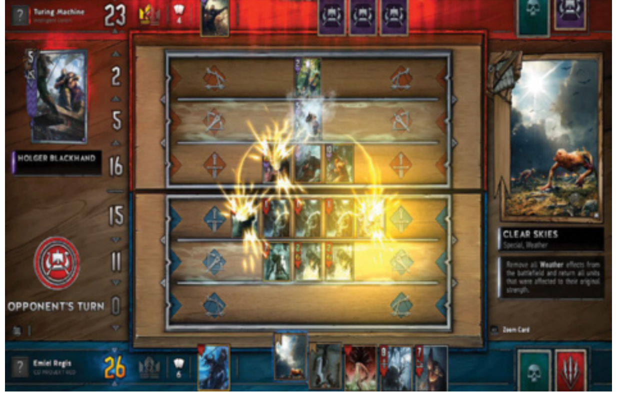
THIS ISN'T JUST A SLICE FROM THE EPIC RPG YOU'LL BE PLAYING

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PS4, PC **ORIGIN:** POLAND **PUBLISHER:** CD PROJEKT
**DEVELOPER:** CD PROJEKT RED **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-2

### 1 BALANCED DECKS

While the base game of Gwent as it existed in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* was a lot of fun, it wasn't exactly the most balanced deck-building game out there. Quite apart from anything else, you could load up your deck with heroes who were unaffected by things like weather on the table. Such cards will be limited to four per deck in the full game release and all other cards have been tweaked where necessary to make them useful in different circumstances.



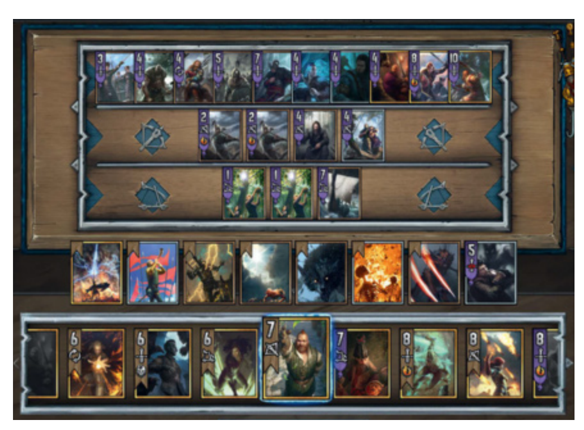




### 2 STORY-DRIVEN CAMPAIGN

The element of the game that everyone is getting the chance to beta test at the moment is, of course, the multiplayer side of *Gwent*, which is only right since that's the bit of the game that's ultimately going to live on and on. However a single-player story mode is also in development offering you a story-driven experience as well as some important lessons about how to make the best use of your *Gwent* deck.

### 3 THE CDPR TOUCH

Probably the most exciting element of *Gwent* that may attract you if you're not typically a trading card game fan is that the *Wild Hunt* team are the ones building the campaign story and they're promising something in line with the dark, mature narratives the series is known for. How is that going to work with a card battling game? We don't know, but when they promise mature narratives we invariably get something special.





Kojima Productions and Sony insist that the latest trailer was made entirely in real time, in-engine, which is impressive to hear.

# WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT DEATH STRANDING (AND WHAT WE DON'T)

## WE HAVE MORE ANSWERS AND MORE QUESTIONS FOR HIDEO KOJIMA'S LATEST

**FORMAT:** PS4 **ORIGIN:** JAPAN **RELEASE:** TBC 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC
**PUBLISHER:** SONY **DEVELOPER:** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

We got our first glimpse of *Death Stranding* at E3 2016 and as the year closes we got to take another look and find out some important new info. Here's what we know, and what we don't, so far.

**We know…** *Death Stranding* is running on the newly christened Decima Engine from Guerrilla Games, the same engine that is in fact currently powering *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. Guerrilla has been evolving the same engine through all of its projects, but the latest version has been heavily upgraded in order to handle the open-world demands of an RPG. As such it's a one-stop shop for world building, AI programming and in-game logic.

**We don't know…** How far along Kojima Productions is in the development of the game or in the make-up of its studio. While the first trailer felt like an early tease that might only have a tangential relationship with the final game, this new trailer is in-engine and looks just as good (if not better, actually) so *Death Stranding* could be closer than we thought.

**We know…** Mads Mikkelsen of *Hannibal*, *Doctor Strange* and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* fame, will be playing the main antagonist to Norman Reedus' lead character in the game. He was approached by Kojima via Danish film director Nicolas Winding Refn and was seemingly taken with the idea of working with such a legendary and maverick game maker.

**We don't know…** Who Mads Mikkelsen's character is commanding. The skeletal soldiers of the latest trailer appear to be connected via cords to him. It suggests a world where solder automatons are being used. Images of death and birth keep melding with each other, but then Kojima did promise he would be reinventing our concept of death in games back around E3, if you remember.

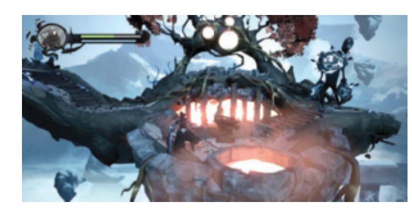
**We know…** Kojima Productions is opening a satellite studio within (or at least close to) Guerrilla Games called Kojima Productions Amsterdam and it is apparently hiring. Decima is now being considered a collaborative project between the Dutch developer and Kojima, with both adding to the code base.

**We don't know…** How do these trailers connect? The dead sea life is a clear connection, the presence of a baby in both trailers, that del Toro and Reedus are wearing the same style of handcuff. Black holes and omnipotent beings were hinted at before, now we have mind control and a mixture of World War II and modern military tech. It's all wonderfully bizarre and enthralling.



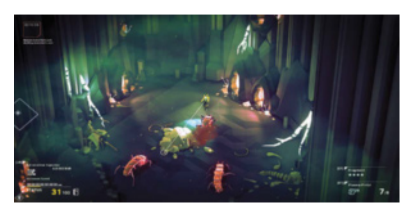
## FOR THE KING

With co-op gameplay in a persistent roguelike RPG, *For The King* offers a unique combination of survival, exploration, adventuring and multiplayer. Throw in the turn-based combat and you have a really interesting mix of elements that should pay off very nicely.



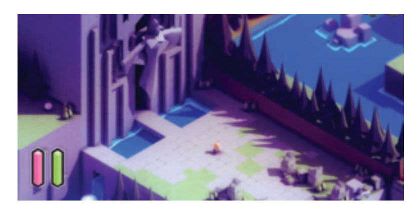
## SHATTERED: TALE OF THE FORGOTTEN KING

We're very keen on this game, in part thanks to its style, which has a dark, Tim Burton-like feel, but also its mix of 2.5D platforming and 3D bosses. And then there's the fact it was built through table-top role-playing, helping to create a rich and storied world.



## BEACON

The core concept behind this ingenious twin-stick shooter is that each time you die a replicator brings you back by gathering up your remnants along with whatever alien life is around you. The strange mutated forms you then take offer all sorts of cool new abilities.



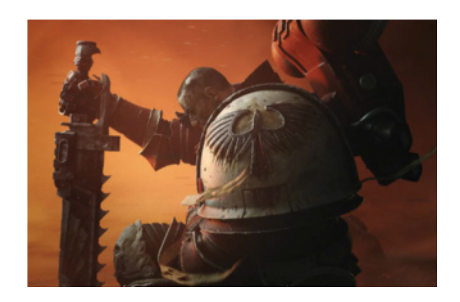
## SECRET LEGEND

Inspired by classic *Zelda* games, but with an isometric, tilt-shifted visual style and a small fox as your hero, *Secret Legend* has a retro feel, but some nice updated gameplay like having a lock-on mechanic and combat rolling. The lighting is lovely, too.



## GNOG

This VR title developed by Ko-op Mode and published by Double Fine Productions puts you inside the heads of a series of weird and wonderful monsters where you must solve puzzles, uncover secrets and generally work out what on earth is going on. It's a lot of fun.



# THE GRIMDARK GETS A SPLASH OF COLOUR IN WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR III

## THE KING OF MODERN REAL-TIME STRATEGY RETURNS WITH AN OLD-SCHOOL MINDSET

**FORMAT:** PC **ORIGIN:** CANADA **PLAYERS:** 1-TBC
**DEVELOPER:** RELIC ENTERTAINMENT
**PUBLISHER:** SEGA **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

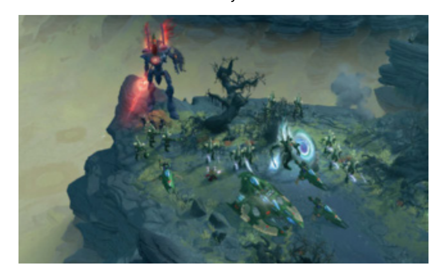
Has it really been six years since the release of *Dawn Of War II*? Relic's real-time strategy series has been conspicuous in its absence, but our longing for another slice of boltgun-waving action has paid off with news that the latest full-fat *Dawn Of War* will arrive in 2017.

From the off it's striking just how colourful the new entry is. It's not quite *World Of Warcraft*, but there's a noticeable shift away from the dark, washed-out palettes that have long been a staple of the *40K* universe. Perhaps a sign that Relic and Sega are attempting to appeal to the MOBA crowd.

While *Dawn Of War III* is trying something new aesthetically, there's a definite ode to the past in how the RTS title is approaching its gameplay. *Dawn Of War II*'s warfare was all about small-scale battles, with skirmishes that were more akin to an action-RPG than a traditional RTS. For the threequel, Relic is dialling back the clock and reinstating an emphasis on base building and larger unit management.

Three factions have been confirmed so far, the Space Marine chapter known as the Blood Ravens, the aloof Eldar, and the Orks. Each will also feature brand new walker units, a first for the franchise, with humanity's Imperial Knights providing the equivalent of a nimble and agile tank.

By focusing its gameplay on the grander battle setup of the original *Dawn Of War*, game number three is clearly hoping to rekindle the magic that made the series' debut entry so essential.





### NEED TO KNOW

HALO WARS 2 IS BEING DEVELOPED BY CREATIVE ASSEMBLY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE STEWARDS OF THE HALO FRANCHISE, 343 INDUSTRIES.

# HALO WARS 2 WILL SUCCEED WHERE OTHERS HAVE FAILED

## A NEW BREED OF RTS

**FORMAT:** XBOX ONE, PC **ORIGIN:** UK **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
**DEVELOPER:** THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY, 343 INDUSTRIES **RELEASE:** 21 FEBRUARY 2017 **PLAYERS:** 1-4

Creative Assembly is taking a gamble with *Halo Wars 2*. The *Total War* developer has as close to a pristine résumé as could be hoped for, but the studio's second attempt at a console RTS could be that record's undoing. For that reason, it's leaning on a revolutionary new mode, called Blitz, to overcome many of the challenges associated with console and controller-based real-time strategy design.

Designed to push players into lightning-quick engagements (with games lasting no longer than 12 minutes), Blitz subverts RTS convention by removing the emphasis on base building and traditional resource management, opting instead to eschew those genre conventions in favour of king-of-the-hill style map control and unit deployment from a user-created deck of cards.

Now, now, don't turn your nose up just yet; it could be the game-changer that paves the way for more strategy games making the leap over to console. You'll only need to worry about one resource – Energy, built over time or acquired on the map – and that is used to air-drop units (such as a group of Marines, a Warthog or a Banshee) directly into battle zones from a limited pool of cards that are drawn at random from your pre-prepared deck.

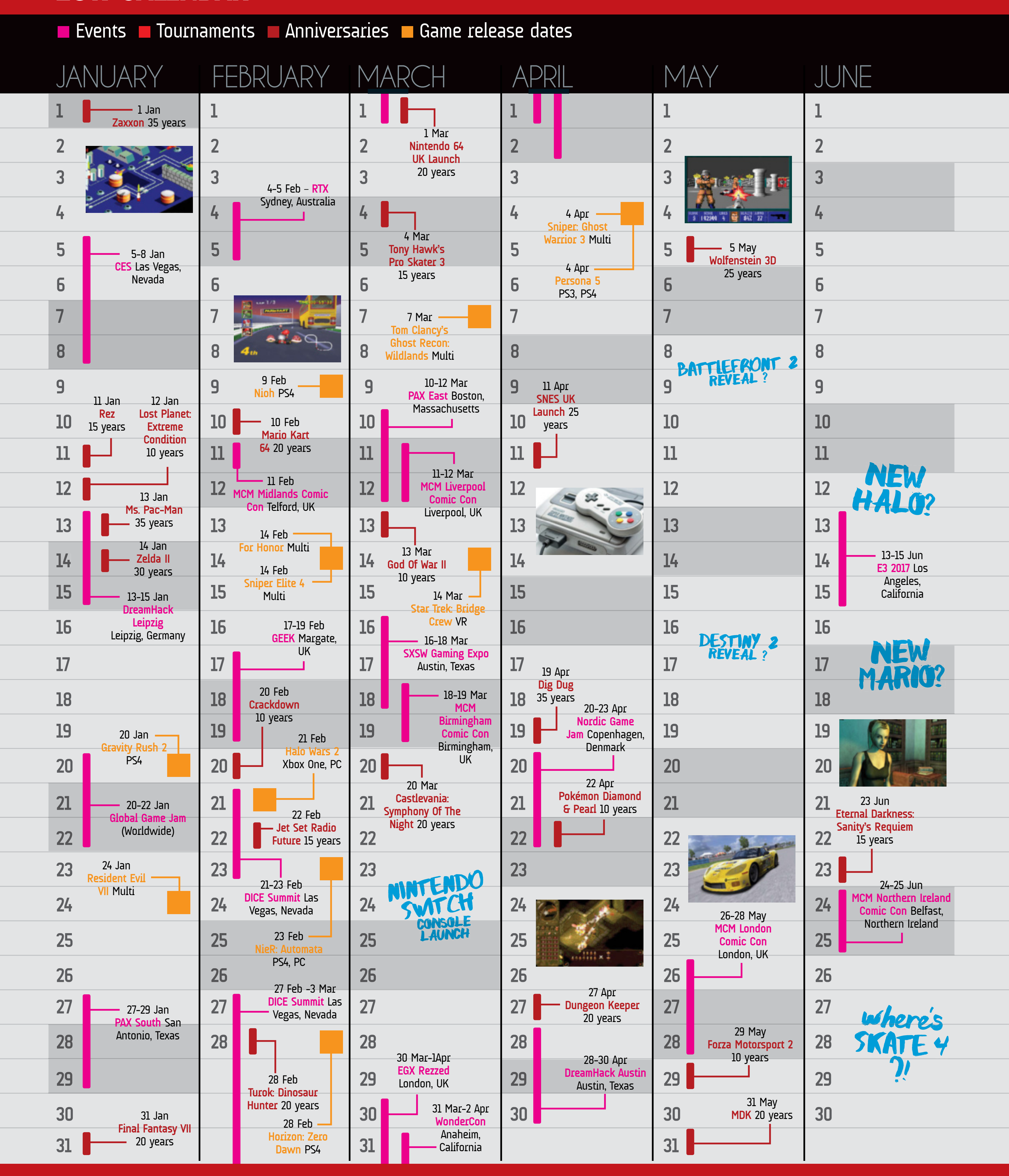
It pushes you to understand the game's core rock-paper-scissors combat design and become instinctively reactive. Knowing when to horde Energy, when to push select troops into the field, and when to go all out with everything you've got can be the difference between success and defeat. Managing and making the best use of the five cards you have at your disposal at any one time also presents a new challenge for RTS players, one you likely haven't experienced before.

While it might seem somewhat sensationalist to claim now, *Halo Wars 2* – and specifically Blitz – could lay the groundwork for the future of RTS on console. It's a fun and frantic mode; customisable enough to mean you'll never quite know what another player has up their sleeve, and designed to be inherently moreish. Creative Assembly might struggle to enthral PC players with Blitz, but for console gamers – dealing with limited keybind and macro options – this could well be the mode you've been waiting for.

WELCOME BACK TO RETRO_



# 2017 CALENDAR





JULY
1 Jul Star Fox 64 20 years
1-2 Jul MCM Ireland Comic Con Dublin, Ireland
3 Jul Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos 15 years
7-9 Jul RTX Austin, Texas
7 Jul Metal Gear 30 years
7-9 Jul ESL One Cologne, Germany
11-13 Jul Develop: Brighton Brighton, UK
14-16 Jul EVO Championship Series Las Vegas, Nevada
20-23 Jul San Diego Comic-Con International San Diego, California
21-23 Jul DreamHack Atlanta Atlanta, Georgia
29-30 Jul MCM Manchester Comic Con Manchester, UK
29 Jul Ecco The Dolphin 25 years
AUGUST
RDR2 LAUNCH?
15 Aug Punch-Out 30 years
21 Aug BioShock 10 years
22-26 Aug Gamescom Cologne, Germany
25 Aug GoldenEye 007 20 years
27 Aug Super Mario Kart 25 years
27 Aug Metroid Prime 3: Corruption 10 years
30 Aug Street Fighter 30 years
SEPTEMBER
FIFA + PES 2018!
10 Sep Battlefield 1942 15 years
12 Sep Heavenly Sword 10 years
14 Sep Skate 10 years
21-24 Sep EGX Birmingham, UK
21-24 Sep Tokyo Game Show Tokyo, Japan
24-25 Sep MCM Scotland Comic Con Glasgow, Scotland
25 Sep Halo 3 10 years
30 Sep Fallout 20 years
OCTOBER
1 Oct Hitman 2: Silent Assassin 15 years
2 Oct Project Gotham Racing 4 10 years
4 Oct Super Mario Sunshine 15 years
5 Oct Maniac Mansion 30 years
8 Oct Mortal Kombat 25 years
9 Oct Portal 10 years
10 Oct The Orange Box 10 years
OCTOBER GRAND THEFT AUTO 20 YEARS
20-22 Oct DreamHack Denver Denver, Colorado
26 Oct The Witcher 10 years
27 Oct Grand Theft Auto: Vice City 15 years
28 Oct Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock 10 years
31 Oct PaRappa the Rapper 20 years
NOVEMBER
SCORPIO LAUNCH?
4 Nov Ratchet & Clank 15 years
5 Nov Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare 10 years
12 Nov Super Mario Galaxy 10 years
13 Nov Crysis 10 years
13 Nov Assassin's Creed 10 years
15 Nov Metroid Prime / Metroid Fusion 15 years
18 Nov Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 15 years
19 Nov Uncharted: Drake's Fortune 10 years
20 Nov Mass Effect 10 years
Rock Band 10 years
21 Nov Sonic The Hedgehog 2 25 years
24 Nov Diddy Kong Racing 20 years
DECEMBER
1 Dec Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 15 years
GAMES™ 15TH BIRTHDAY
13 Dec The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker 15 years
17 Dec Mega Man 30 years
18 Dec Final Fantasy 30 years
20 Dec Phantasy Star 30 years
23 Dec Gran Turismo 20 years
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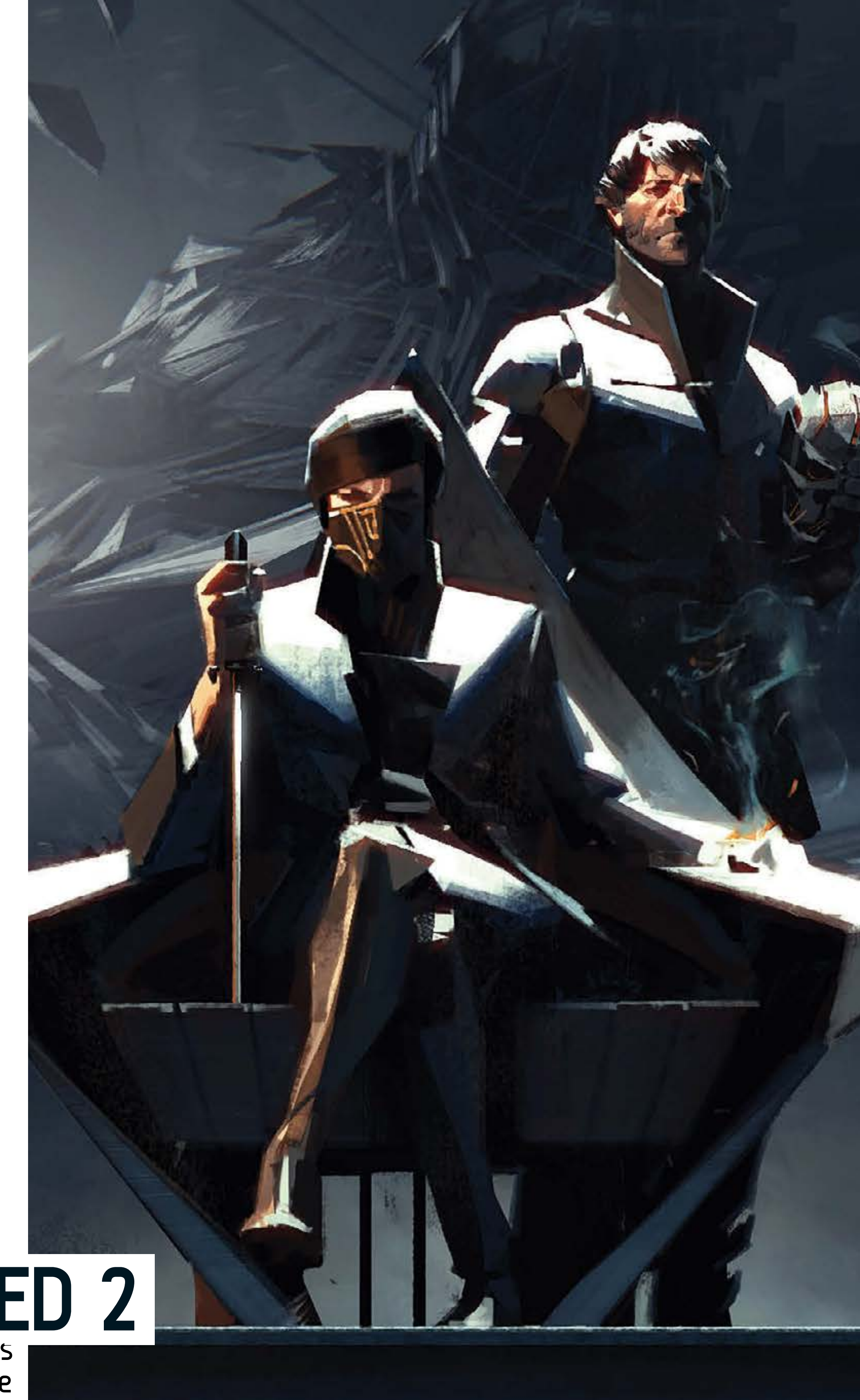

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# Reviews

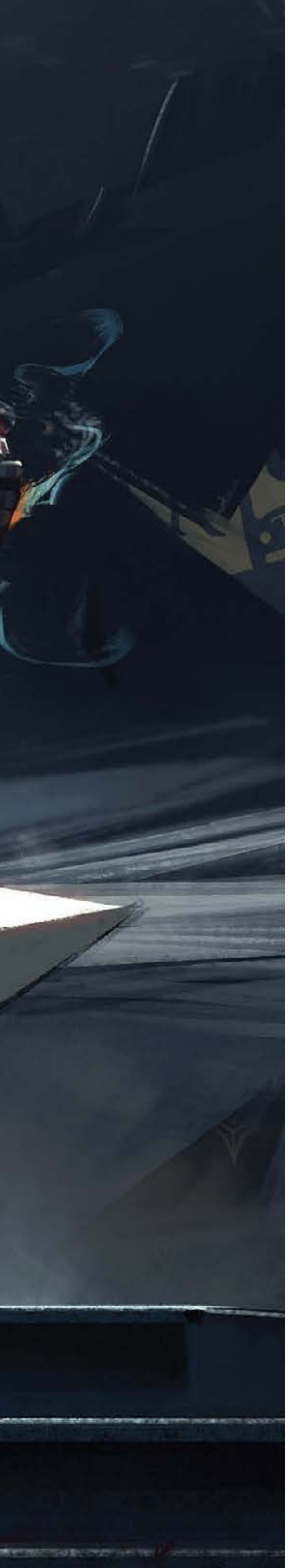




68

## DISHONORED 2

The tale of Corvo continues as Emily is ousted from the throne, but has the game evolved enough to truly be a genre-defining moment?



## THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.





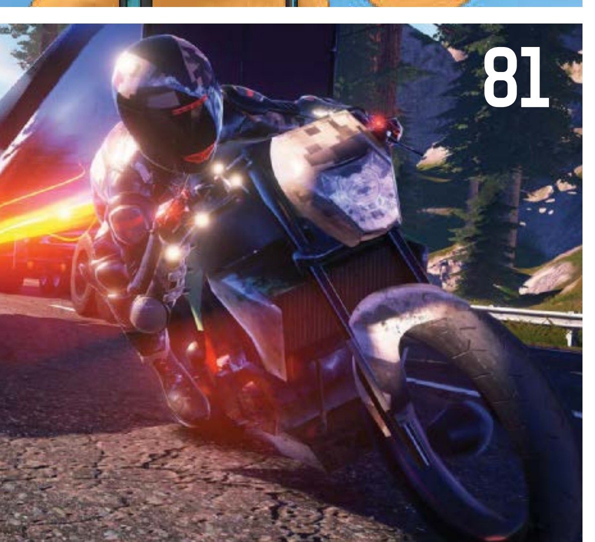











## AGREE/DISAGREE?

**games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?**

**Let us know through the following channels:**




@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright



RECLAIMING THE THRONE

# Dishonored 2

***Dishonored 2* is a game that seduces you with its giddying spectrum of possibilities.** Moving through its world, you might spot a route that can take you onto the rooftops to stalk silently above patrolling guards. Another could take you through the basement of an abandoned building infested with nests of dangerous bloodflies that will attack anyone who gets too close. You might peek through a keyhole to overhear a conversation that offers a clue about an alternative way of taking out an assassination target, stumble across a document that gives you the code to a safe, or find a black market shop selling the key to an armoury. This in turn might result in you doubling back on yourself to explore another path based on the new information that's fallen into your hands. Discovering runes littered throughout the game's world will give you access to supernatural powers that expand on the possibilities you find unfurling in front of you, opening up new routes and strategies for dealing with guards, perhaps even ones that you didn't initially foresee, courtesy of the creative way in which powers can be combined.

This is a game that values player agency intensely, then. In that sense, the pre-launch focus placed on the way the game lets you play aggressively or with stealth could be somewhat misleading. Yes, those are both choices the game allows you to make, and that it supports with powers and equipment geared towards both stealth and combat playstyles, but *Dishonored 2* goes far beyond that binary. It is not a case of choosing the stealthy route over the combat one and then having the game collapse back into linearity. Let's take dealing with a Wall of Light – essentially a forcefield that fries anyone who tries to pass through it – that is blocking your path as an example. You may disable it in the wake of a cacophony of blood and violence, or as quietly and delicately as you please, but those are not your only options; you could also find another way around. Even then, "finding another way around" might mean teleporting up to a balcony, possessing a rat and crawling through a tiny vent, or finding a character who is prepared to do you a favour if you do one for them first. Within those different approaches, the game continues to fan out, offering even more choices and unexpected opportunities to progress, or simply to do something cool.

Indeed, one of the things that makes *Dishonored 2* work so well is that it isn't afraid to let you miss out. Packed with so much possibility, you are constantly aware of the fact that there were many different ways you could have gone and many ways your experience could have been different. This means that there's a real sense of discovery when you come across something significant, cognisant as you are of the fact that you could easily have passed it by. Of course, you just as likely missed something interesting or fun on the route you spotted but chose *not* to take, but only by leaving that possibility open can the game create the sense that the choices you made mattered and that the way you achieved your goals was unique. Wrapping the game's design around that combination of agency and contingency proves to be incredibly stimulating.

Speaking of agency, there's an early choice to make when it comes to who you want to play as. Royal Protector Corvo Attano, the protagonist of the first *Dishonored*, returns, but you can also choose to play as Emily Kaldwin, who has grown into an adult in the period between the two titles and is now the Empress in residence in the steampunk-inflected, Victorian-inspired city of Dunwall. Trained by her father, Corvo, she is just as competent with a sword in her hand, should you find yourself going toe to toe with enemies, blocking and parrying in between firing blasts from your pistol or bolts from your crossbow.

Corvo brings with him a roster of supernatural powers that will be familiar to anyone who played the first game: his teleportation power, Blink, the ability to possess enemies and animals, slow time, and so on. Emily has her own Blink equivalent called Far Reach, which shoots out a tentacle that pulls her to her destination, instead of teleporting her there, and that can be upgraded to pull objects and enemies towards her. A necessary inclusion, given that being able to warp quickly around the world, whether using Blink or

## ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

**SILENT, NOT DEADLY:** More non-lethal options have been added since the first game. You can now knock enemies out when you leap down on them from above, as well as killing them, for example.

## DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PS4
**OTHER FORMATS:** Xbox One, PC
**ORIGIN:** France
**PUBLISHER:** Bethesda Softworks
**DEVELOPER:** Arkane Studios
**PRICE:** £49.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A

BETTER THAN

THIEF

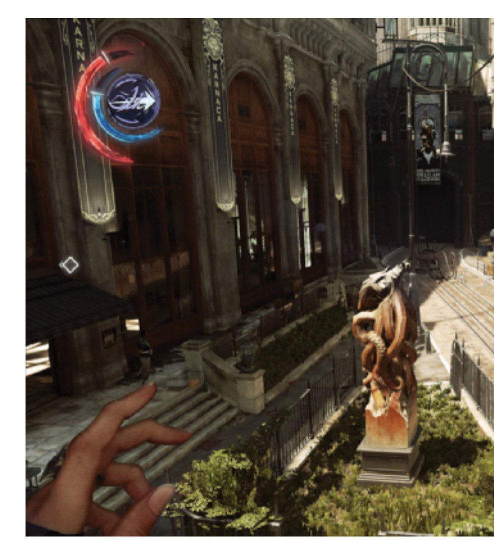


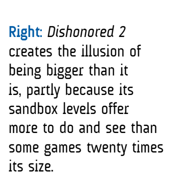


AS GOOD AS

DISHONORED







Right: *Dishonored 2* creates the illusion of being bigger than it is, partly because its sandbox levels offer more to do and see than some games twenty times its size.

JUST A SCORE
Download on the App Store
GIVE YOUR SCORES FOLLOW OUR SCORES

**THESE POWERS ARE A SHINING EXAMPLE OF THE ORIGINALITY AND CREATIVITY DISHONORED 2 DELIVERS**



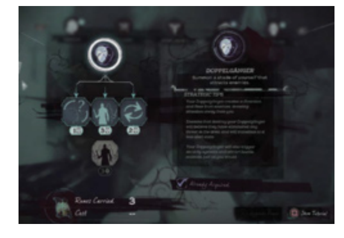
## POWER FANTASY

BREAKING DOWN SOME OF DISHONORED 2'S COOL NEW POWERS



### MESMERIZE

Used to summon a void that nearby enemies will stare into in a trance, this power is probably only going to be useful to players that favour a stealthy approach. It can be upgraded to distract up to four enemies and to last longer.



### DOPPELGANGER

This power allows you to summon a copy of yourself to distract enemies while you sneak past or run away from danger. Upgrades include one that gives your copy the ability to fight enemies and one that allows you to swap places with it.



### SHADOW WALK

Transforming you into a stealthier form, Shadow Walk is a great option for a non-lethal approach. Upgrading it allows you to perform multiple assassinations while in Shadow Walk form, however, and it can also work with a more deadly playstyle.

Far Reach, is one of *Dishonored*'s greatest pleasures. However, Emily also has access to a new range of unlockable powers. These include Shadow Walk, which transforms you into a spectral black creature that is hard for guards to spot; Domino, which lets you link enemies together so that they share the same fate; and Doppelganger, which allows you to create a copy of yourself to distract or fight with your foes.

These powers are a shining example of the originality and creativity *Dishonored 2* delivers, offering a staggering range of gameplay possibilities that makes it feel like no other game out there. Whether you are using your powers to execute a carefully laid plan hatched after scouting patrol routes from the rooftops, or reacting in panic to being rushed by a detail of guards who have just spotted you, they are intensely satisfying to use and dovetail brilliantly with the excellent level design that pushes you to play with their potential.

The creative play that the game's powers are crafted to support comes sharply into focus for those prepared to push at the boundaries of what your abilities can do, particularly when used in combination. Domino, for example, is a hell of a lot of fun to use in and of itself – linking a handful of guards together from the shadows and then dropping them with a sleeping dart is a satisfaction that is perhaps only surpassed by linking a guard to an innocent he is about to execute for some instant karmic retribution. Thanks to Doppelganger, though, you can extend the potential of the power. What's to stop you linking guards to the fake version of yourself you've created with Doppelganger and executing your conjured imposter, thereby dropping every guard linked to it? Nothing, that's what. How about using Doppelganger as a traversal tool instead of for its intended purpose as a distraction? Drop off a perilously high-ledge, create a Doppelganger on the way down, then perform a drop-assassination on it and you've just found a way to break an otherwise fatal fall. These are just a couple of examples of the clever ways the game's powers can be employed and yet another instance of the way that *Dishonored 2* rewards experimentation.

Regardless of who you choose to play as and what powers you have at your disposal as a consequence, you soon find yourself exiled from Dunwall courtesy of a coup that deposes Emily from her throne. Bad for her, but good for us, because it means we get to explore a brand new location as we track down the key conspirators responsible for your downfall: the city of Karnaca.

Karnaca is the antithesis to Dunwall's dark and gloomy London-like streets: soaked in sunlight and inspired by the architecture of Southern Europe. Excellent art direction and a keen attention to detail ensures that while the city has its own distinct character, it nevertheless feels consistent with the world established in the first game. The city's aesthetic of dilapidated grandeur offers some spectacular sights that tap into the kind of fascination you might have experienced browsing 'ruin porn' photography from abandoned places that circulates online. Karnaca, then, is a place of beauty, albeit one that's corrupted and decaying.

Now we must come to *Dishonored 2*'s only weakness: storytelling. At an overarching level, the game fails to go far beyond "get the people that stole Emily's throne" and its presentation of

## FAQs

**Q. NEED TO KNOW THE STORY?**
No. Story is far from being the series' strong point so the odd reference going over your head won't matter.

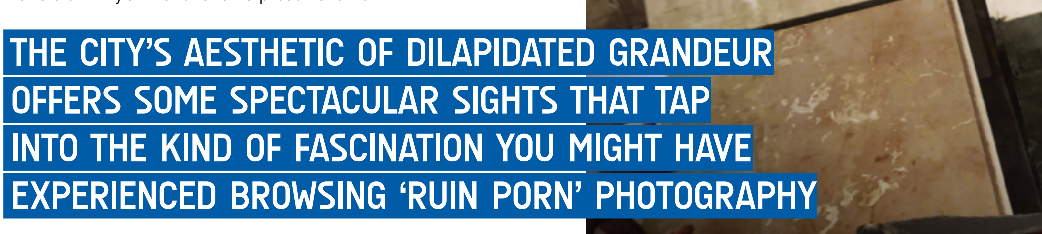
**Q. WORTH PLAYING TWICE?**
Yes. With two characters with unique powers and different ways of achieving your objectives, it's worth a second go.

**Q. IS IT A CHALLENGE?**
As much as you want it to be. Whack up the difficulty, play in no-powers mode, and try to ghost it for the ultimate test.



**Right:** Things can get bloody very quickly when you're spotted. Just remember there is no shame in running.



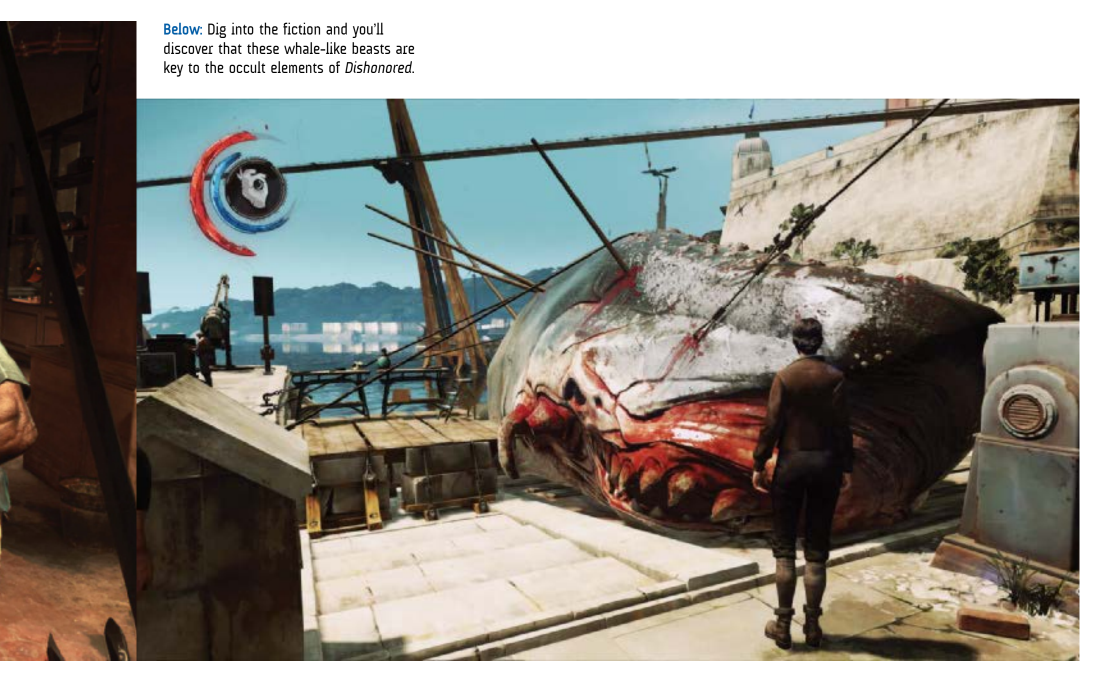



**Above:** It's admirable that the game makes the effort of going against the grain by giving women the key roles in its story, and a shame that that story doesn't do them justice.

**THE CITY'S AESTHETIC OF DILAPIDATED GRANDEUR OFFERS SOME SPECTACULAR SIGHTS THAT TAP INTO THE KIND OF FASCINATION YOU MIGHT HAVE EXPERIENCED BROWSING 'RUIN PORN' PHOTOGRAPHY**



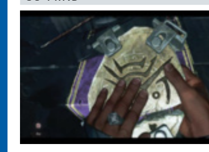

**Below:** Dig into the fiction and you'll discover that these whale-like beasts are key to the occult elements of *Dishonored*.



## TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

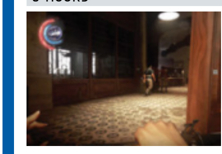
### THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

**30 MINS**



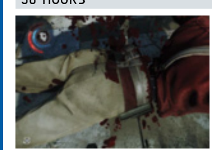
Staring at the upgrade screen for ages and agonising over which of the game's many powers is the best to spend your hard-earned runes on.

**3 HOURS**



Taking your time crawling through corridors and across rooftops, doing your best to be super sneaky on your first run through the game.

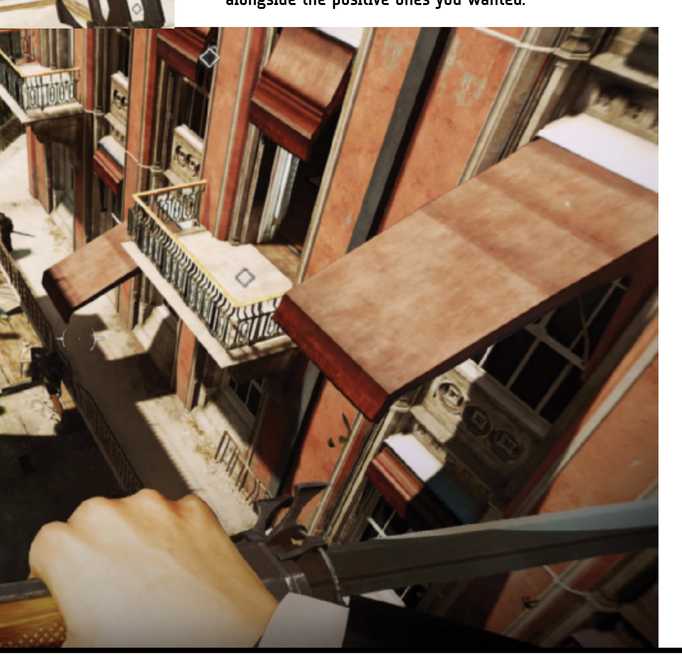
**30 HOURS**



Shooting on sight and cutting people in half now that you're on your second playthrough and finally feeling liberated to cause as much chaos as possible.

## CHARMED, I'M SURE

**The runes that you can use to unlock and upgrade powers aren't the only mystical items to be discovered in *Dishonored 2*'s world. You can also collect bone charms that can be equipped to provide you with useful enhancements – higher movement speed, a chance that enemy weapons will misfire, an increase in the healing power of food, and so on. New to the sequel is the option to unlock bone charm crafting, allowing you to stack and combine traits to create powerful new charms. Just don't get too greedy: the more traits you combine, the higher chance your charm will become corrupted and gain a negative trait alongside the positive ones you wanted.**



Karnaca as a utopia gone bad is too simplistic. At a micro level, it suffers from poor scripting that leads to unnatural conversations, and throws out the odd jarringly bad line. There is at least the hint of an interesting theme in the suggestion that Emily may somehow be complicit in the state the world is in, be it through naivety or inaction, but it never rises above a whisper. Had it been amplified, an exploration of the contradiction between the protagonists' apparent virtue and their role in overseeing an unjust system could have provided the game with the narrative hook it is sorely lacking.

The first *Dishonored* also suffered from poor storytelling, but it did have one redeeming element in that respect in the form of the Heart. The Heart is the device you use to find runes to upgrade your powers and bone charms to enhance your abilities, but it can also be used to give you information about people and places in the world. In the first game, the secrets it revealed about those at the wrong end of Dunwall's social strata helped the injustice and inequality of its world resonate in an emotionally effective way. Use the Heart on the NPCs walking Karnaca's streets, however, and you find that 9 out of 10 are rapists, murderers, thieves, or fraudsters. We are not against the unmasking of this dark side of humanity, but *Dishonored 2* focuses so heavily on it that it has the effect of rendering those unsavoury elements cartoonish rather than horrifying. Full of perpetrators and oddly lacking in victims, the game displays an outright contempt for the classes that are ostensibly at the wrong end of Karnaca's corrupt regime, undercutting its ability to make what is happening to the city matter. It's hard not to attribute this loss of subtlety at least in part to the fact that the Heart is no longer a chillingly semi-aware presence of mysterious origin, but a character of its own. Had it been an interesting character, or one that brought something interesting out of our protagonists, that shift of focus may have been worthwhile, but unfortunately, that's not the case.

## SYNTHESIS

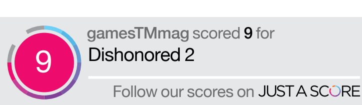
### BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

**FIGHT AND FLIGHT:** Trying to be both a great stealth game and a great action game is tough, but *Dishonored 2* achieves it with an array of equipment and powers to support both approaches.

The weaknesses in *Dishonored 2*'s storytelling are worth noting, but they should not distract from just how fantastic a game this is. However you choose to play it, *Dishonored 2* will make that experience rewarding by supporting you with gear, upgrades, and powers that can be bent to your will, tying it all together with some of the most intricate and engaging level design we've encountered. As a story, it may well be lacking, but as a collection of expertly crafted play spaces where design and mechanics reinforce and respond to your agency in myriad delightful and engaging ways, *Dishonored 2* is pure magic.

## VERDICT

**A MASTERCLASS IN GAME DESIGN THAT VALUES YOUR AGENCY**



CONSISTENT INCONSISTENCIES ARE THE REAL KILLER

# Watch Dogs 2

**Declaring *Watch Dogs 2* as a success, simply by virtue of it being better than its predecessor, feels like an act of reductive reasoning.** *Of course* this sequel is better, because how could it not be? It would have been a legitimately impressive act of stubbornness on the part of the studio – particularly one as progressive and inherently iterative as Ubisoft Montreal – to produce something as overtly boring and cynical as the original *Watch Dogs* for a second time, wouldn't it?

Ubisoft wants you to recognise that the game is the direct antithesis of everything that encapsulated Aiden Pierce's monotonous think piece on cyber-terrorism. To be blinded by the raw, impulsive energy exuding from this vibrant new game world, fresh cast of lovable characters and neatly expanded gameplay options. *Watch Dogs 2* is fuelled by reaction. It is, by its very nature, reactive; to real-world events and politics, to the indiscretions of its predecessor and to the type of audience that largely dominates the cultural sphere around us today. Although it isn't self-aware enough to truly define itself or its ambitions, to step out of the shadow of *Grand Theft Auto* – often getting caught in a loop of overcompensating and under-delivering.

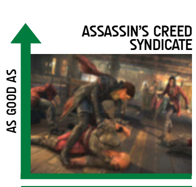
That isn't to say that *Watch Dogs 2* isn't an enjoyable game, because it is in bursts – in that sort of moreish *Assassin's Creed II* sort of way. The driving feels fast and responsive, the character and personality of the place is fantastic, while the sandbox itself is stunning; the scope for causing emergent chaos, chaining together hacks within the eccentricities of the game world and its populous is a real delight. *Watch Dogs 2* is childish anarchy splashed across the skyline of the San Francisco bay area; punk for the YouTube generation, a power fantasy for those that would draw strength in battlegrounds cast over social platforms – until it starts forcing you to commit a litany of federal crimes that would make *GTA V*'s Trevor Phillips blush.

**DETAILS**

**FORMAT:** Xbox One
**FORMAT:** PS4, PC
**ORIGIN:** Canada
**PUBLISHER:** Ubisoft
**DEVELOPER:** Ubisoft Montreal
**PRICE:** £49.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1-4
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

AS GOOD AS

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE



WORSE THAN



GTA V



**Above:** Marcus Holloway and the team of renegade hackers are a genuine delight to spend hours with. This is some of Ubisoft's finest characterisation and writing; you'll be desperate to spend more time with each of them.

**Below:** The game world is stunning. This is one of the finest game world recreations we've seen, with San Francisco offering plenty of opportunities for emergent fun and discovery.



## FAQs

**Q. CAN'T YOU JUST PLAY NON-LETHALLY?**

The only non-lethal weapon available in the game is the Taser, which is fairly ineffective in the latter half of the game. Otherwise you just have to rely on hacking people unconscious.

**Q. THAT'S OKAY, ISN'T IT?**

In theory, yes. But in reality, your inability to move bodies means you're always at a disadvantage. The AI is horribly aggressive and one found person is the catalyst for an array of violence.

**Q. BUT THE GAME HAS A 3D PRINTER?**

It has a 3D printer that allows you to create machine guns, drones and RC cars. But not the array of non-lethal weaponry that actually exists on the market today. It's nonsense.

# WATCH DOGS 2 IS CHILDISH ANARCHY SPLASHED ACROSS THE SKYLINE OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA; PUNK FOR THE YOUTUBE GENERATION

*Watch Dogs 2* constantly feels caught between being the game that it *wants* to be and the one that it *had* to be. Therein lies the problem that undercuts the entire experience: it's fun, but ultimately restrained by its core decisions. It's all hashtags and hijinks to combat surmounting social unrest and media manipulation, until the restrictive stealth systems force you to start pulling out gats to find fun. The game features a cast of loveable millennials, hell-bent on raging against the machine; kick-starting a social media revolution where virality is the most powerful tool in your arsenal, until it becomes apparent that 3D printing your own guns is far more effective at making a mark than any SEO or your sole non-lethal firearm, a puny Taser, could ever be.

It's a game upended by its inconsistencies. Some missions will see you, Marcus Holloway, a brilliant and charming young hacker, stealing music from disgraced pharmaceutical executives, leaking trailers for unannounced Ubisoft games, or tinkering with the speed on a corrupt CEOs treadmill and streaming the results online for the 'bantz'. It's throwaway entertainment, chaos caused with a smile and overbearing sense of irreverence. You spend much of the game drunk or high, stumbling around San Francisco listening to a killer soundtrack, wearing a mismatch of bright attire. You do this while building a following online, better spreading DedSec's anti-establishment message – a group that is almost always painted as a bunch of peaceful, determined hacktivists.

Until they aren't, of course. Eventually you are forced into the role of social justice judge, jury and (ultimately) executioner. But for what reason? Because videogames, we suspect would be Ubisoft's answer, though we struggle to accept that; who ever it was at Ubisoft that pushed to have firearms included in this game has done it a real, honest-to-god disservice. The presence of lethal guns doesn't fit the rambunctious tone, nor does it work in tandem with the game's basic design, or bring anything to the world in any way – instead they actively take from it, highlighting a clear lack of imagination (and perhaps even faith) in the hacking mechanics themselves and the core mission design.

When the stealth systems crumble, when the hacking – while expanded in interesting and inventive ways, they are still ultimately limited – fails to work in the indented fashion or the hilariously aggressive AI takes you to task for so much as looking at a laptop, you'll be forced to pull out a weapon and start murdering everything in sight, lest you wish to engage in a frustrating crawl out of sight. *Watch Dogs 2* has a warped sense of morality and justice that is at odds with the buoyancy of the characters and their plight; it makes existing in the world feel uncomfortable. It's a game that wants to focus on rebellious youth – on carefree activism and peaceful protest against a system – but forces them to become hollow shells of the videogame and action heroes they spend so much time making jokes of in the dialogue. It's jarring and pushes the suspension of disbelief to an unreasonable level of acceptability.

Murder, theft and destruction make sense in games such as *GTA V* and *Saints Row* – even the original *Watch Dogs*. These acts are made acceptable within the context of their worlds and characters; they pulse with an undercurrent of violence. *Watch Dogs 2* wastes its incredible, realistic world and believable characters by leaning on boring gunplay, basic cover-shooter mechanics and tonal-inconsistencies that upend every part of it. *Watch Dogs 2* has the opposite problems to its predecessor then. Acts of aggression (in whatever form they may have taken) made sense for vigilante Aiden Pierce, his mission thrived on it; and oh god now *Watch Dogs 2* is making us defend and justify the existence of the blandest protagonist in videogames. But that's *Watch Dogs 2*, a game that will make you question everything you thought you knew about open world game design, because clearly something needs to change.



## ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

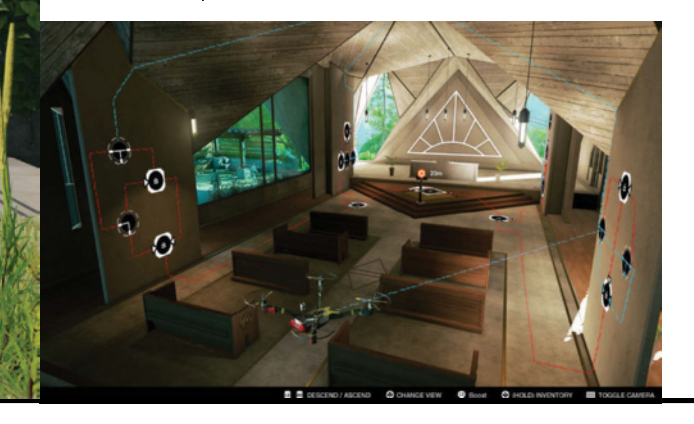
**JOYFUL** – *Watch Dogs 2* isn't as dour or morose as its predecessor; the world and its characters have an intoxicating charm.



## A QUESTION OF MORALS

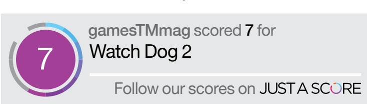
*Watch Dogs 2* is in constant conflict with the inherent moral and tonal quandaries it creates within itself. It doesn't hesitate in sending Holloway – a character propelled into action after being wrongly profiled by CtOS – into situations where he must commit violent, vindictive crimes far worse than the one he was originally accused of. Take the act of forcefully breaking into buildings to slap DedSec memes all over their systems, beating any guards that try to stop you half to death with a cue ball attached to a bungee cord

You too are able to wrongly profile anybody in the game world for crimes they didn't commit and some missions demand it of you. SWAT the Internet Troll to teach him a lesson and hack a young girl's webcam to scare her into understanding the dangers of live streaming – the inclusion of these elements is an anachronism, with Ubisoft seemingly afraid of veering too far from the path of *GTA*.



## VERDICT

**DESPERATE TO BE DIFFERENT, BUT ULTIMATELY TOO FAMILIAR**



"FFXV QUICKLY MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A PART OF ITS WORLD AS OPPOSED TO A VISITOR TO IT"

## DANCES WITH SWORDS

*FFXV*'s combat is more action-orientated than past releases, but that doesn't mean tactics can be ignored. While there do exist enemies that can be defeated with ease and without thought, tougher beasts require careful pre-planning and constant awareness of the situation that each of the four heroes find themselves in.

While you only take direct control of Noctis, it's your responsibility – for the most part – to keep your teammates alive and act in a manner that makes best use of the combined strength of the four. Acting solo is the surest way to find yourself dead without having managed to put the smallest of dents in your foe. Take the time to fully understand the talents inherent to each character and the possibilities for tactical play become obvious.



**Above:** Different foods give you different, limited-time stat boosts that can be the difference between being well-prepared for a fight and not. It pays, therefore, to eat a performance-enhancing meal before you take on bosses and larger monsters.

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**DETAILS**

**FORMAT:** PS4
**OTHER FORMATS:** Xbox One
**ORIGIN:** Japan
**PUBLISHER:** Square Enix
**DEVELOPER:** In-house
**PRICE:** £49.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A

BOYS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

# Final Fantasy XV

**With its sense of freedom and romance, the promise of new horizons and fresh adventure, the open road sums up what *Final Fantasy XV* is all about.** In both its narrative and its very existence, this is a game about making sure destiny is fulfilled; the road acting as a visual metaphor for the journey towards achieving exactly that. Protagonist Prince Noctis is, whether he likes it or not, on a path to making sure his regal responsibilities are met and his destiny along with it. As an entity, the game itself bears the burden of reigniting the passions of a fanbase whose numbers have dwindled over the past decade thanks to a string of underwhelming releases in the face of stiffer competition across the RPG space.

Ultimately, *FFXV* succeeds in creating a new foundation upon which a series that was once unmatched amongst its genre peers can begin anew. Director Hajime Tabata has succeeded in delivering an RPG that possesses a unique personality, blending Western game design ideals into a Japanese sensibility without undermining the core fundamentals that made this franchise so popular in the first place. However, it insists on stumbling and hiccupping along the way to proving itself as something worth celebrating.

Once the honeymoon period is over and excitement at starting a new adventure has worn off it's all too easy to dismiss *FFXV*, with its fetch quests, constant barrage of hollow NPCs and stat-heavy menus, as an MMO without the multiplayer element. Clearly, Tabata has been inspired by the success of *FFXIV*, as well as the box ticking objectives used in popular Western games from *Assassin's Creed* to *Fallout*, and that influence threatens to overshadow the entire experience early on.

Bear with the repetition, though, and what seemed like a disparate offering starts coming into place and reveals itself as something oozing charm, character and complexity to the point where you want to continue playing simply because you've come to trust that there's more it wants to give. The combination of its lavish setting, fairytale-esque cast, the juxtaposition of old and new game design concepts and its deliberate blend of the whacky with the serious provides a sense of security in that it quickly makes you feel like a part of its world as opposed to a visitor to it.

A large part of that welcome is delivered by the leading cast, made up of four friends travelling the world in what looks like a Bentley as designed by Gucci. You take direct control of Noctis, a man with a boy's voice and the combat ability of a master swordsman, with the other three following in your wake and looking to you for direction.

It's through the relationship that bonds these four that the game delivers a sense of authorship. The open world setting results in a core plot that is awkwardly told and difficult to care deeply about, but the characters and their growth over time provides ample space for an emotional connection to develop between player and game. This connection is strong enough to make you care about what's happening to these four even if the core story beats influencing their journey lack any genuine interest or originality. Really, *FFXV* is a great example of how articulately drawn characters are able to overcome obvious deficiencies in narrative elsewhere.

The four also act as a representation of just how good this game is at fitting a huge quantity of different elements together. It would have been easy for Noctis and company to consistently step on each other's feet, the chaos resulting in none of them being able to breathe and show their value. That doesn't happen, though; the writing and arrangement of personalities meaning that they come together to feel like a single proposition as opposed to four elements in conflict.

Quite brilliantly, this skilful combination is found throughout the rest of the game. Combat is fast paced in comparison to other *Final Fantasy* outings, but it manages to sit snugly alongside a more meditative, calmer approach to exploration. Levelling up is slow and takes dedication once you're past the lower levels, but this is straddled by a system of core and side quests, as well as monster hunts, mini-games, gear customisation and character interactions, which means you're never left feeling as though you're being stunted or refused a sense of progression.

It's a rare feat to be able to include so many ideas and have all of them feel like both natural bedfellows and meaningful to engage with. Tabata has proven himself a director of great tact and thought through the delicacy in which elements are arranged, the vast offering of *FFXV* working to make this a game that should be equally interesting to both veteran fans and series newcomers.

*FFXV*, then, makes good on its promise that it would be a game worth waiting for. It's the game that makes the entire franchise as relevant as it was in Nineties and early Noughties and it has fulfilled the destiny Square Enix wanted for it in that it has created a new platform from which even better things can be expected from it in the future. Without question, *Final Fantasy* is once again a giant within the RPG world.



**Above:** The world is so lovingly crafted that it soon starts to feel like a character in its own right, the way settlements both large and small sit alongside forests and lakes creating an idealised vision of how humans and nature can co-exist.




**Left:** Characters are drawn in such a way as to make it seem as though they have been ripped straight from a comic book.

## FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**ALL FOR ONE:** Individually, the four friends that make up Noctis' gang are one-dimensional, but as a whole they come together to feel like a single, engaging and emotive character through which to understand the world they live in.

## FAQs

**Q. HOW OFTEN DO CHOCOBOS APPEAR?**

Once you've completed the quest that unlocks them you can ride chocobos as often as you like, so long as you have enough funds to cover the small fee to rent them.

**Q. CAN YOU CUSTOMISE CHARACTERS?**

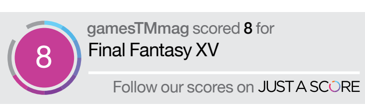
Characters, as well as your car, can be customised in a way that alters their visual appearance and how they perform in battle.

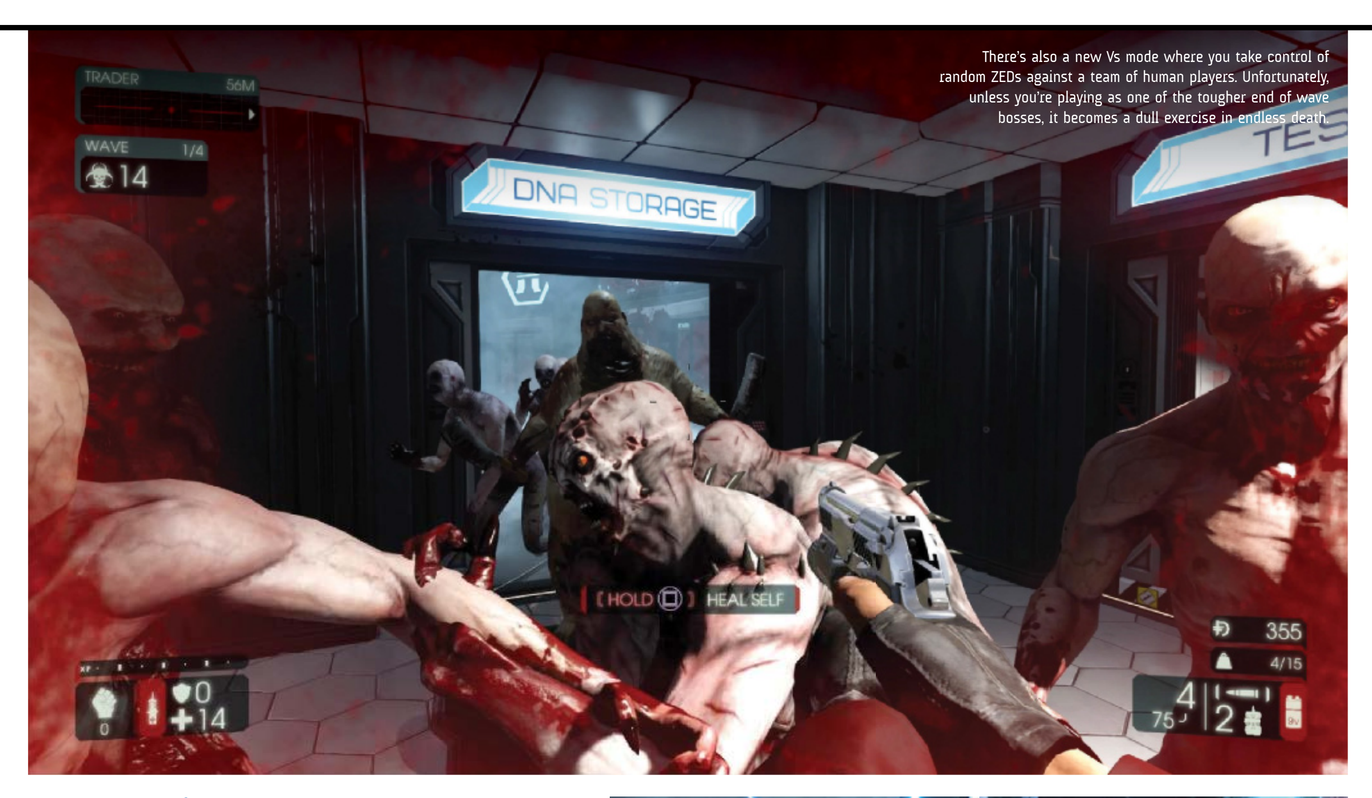
**Q. LOTS OF MINI-GAMES?**

Extra curricular activities range from elaborate pinball machines to fishing to monster hunts that earn you serious cash.

## VERDICT

A WONDERFUL NEW FOUNDATION TO BUILD ON






There's also a new Vs mode where you take control of random ZEDs against a team of human players. Unfortunately, unless you're playing as one of the tougher end of wave bosses, it becomes a dull exercise in endless death.

A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

# Killing Floor 2

**A quick glance at the mutated zombie hordes currently pouring down a corridor at you, all blades for arms and foaming jaws, you'd think you were slap bang in the middle of a horror nightmare.** Paris is burning, the world is coming to a rather grisly end. Are you scared? Of course not, you've got a flamethrower in your hands and a couple of buddies toting the kind of weapons that would give the NRA a fluttering heart. Anyone for crispy ZED?

This is *Killing Floor 2* in a nutshell - throw you and a bunch of other virtual survivors into a ruined urban-set map, sprinkle in some weapon-spewing 3D printers, season with heavy metal and slather with the world's most genetically diverse zombie ensemble. As you might imagine this is no great departure from the 2009 original, invoking none-too-subtly its inspiration from the *Left 4 Dead* template, but then again we know this isn't a wheel-esque reinvention of the shooter genre. Instead, Tripwire gives us more of the same with plenty of improvements and new modes.

The varied map design from the first game returns, with everything from open streets to cramped subways providing all the bottlenecks and kill boxes you could need to blow wave after wave of undead to rotten bits. Tripwire has long embraced the creativity of its community here, and that sense of variety extends to its classes (now increased to ten from the four in the Early Access version on PC). Each one – from the melee-oomph of Berserker to the pyromania of Firebug – rewards a particular playstyle, but the game still gifts you experience for actions outside of your class, making its progression system feel free and quite dynamic.

There's only one small problem: the combat. For a game all about getting stuck into the undead horde like a crazed madman, the variety of weapons neither pack enough punch nor feel sufficiently different to warrant that much experimentation. Compared to the slick arsenals of *Titanfall 2* and *Infinite Warfare*, its combat model is fun for a while but soon feels noticeably dated.

Despite being one of those games that sat in Early Access for way too long, the version that's arrived on PS4 and Xbox One is still the best version out there. The increased number of classes offer a lot of variety, while the dynamic levelling system rewards players for doing the things they enjoy the most. And it looks and performs really well, unexpectedly presenting itself as an ideal way to test the mettle of your PS4 Pro in 4K.

But in a year that's given us some of the best shooters in quite some time - most of which have arrived in the last month or so - *Killing Floor 2* finds itself bringing a frying pan to a gunfight. Much like *Evolve*, *Killing Floor 2* looks fun but it doesn't have the intrinsic character of *Call Of Duty*'s Zombies or the long-term attraction of *Overwatch* to linger long in the mind or the disc tray.

**DETAILS**

**FORMAT:** PS4
**OTHER FORMATS:** Xbox One, PC
**ORIGIN:** United States
**PUBLISHER:** Tripwire Interactive
**DEVELOPER:** Tripwire Interactive
**PRICE:** £29.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1-12
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

BETTER THAN

KILLING FLOOR



WORSE THAN

TITANFALL 2





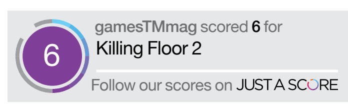
## ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

**RELOAD:** Tripwire has really gone to town on making its weapons a serious improvement on the original. Even something as simple as a reload has been mocapped for *every* weapon.

## VERDICT

LOUD AND SILLY, BUT A LITTLE HOLLOW



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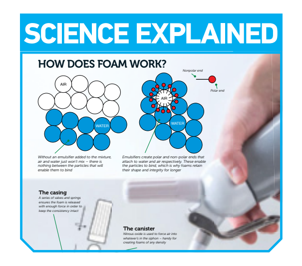
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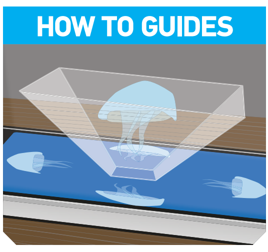
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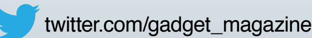
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WE WILL PROBABLY NEVER CATCH 'EM ALL AT THIS RATE

# Pokémon Sun & Moon

**Fuelled by 20 years of nostalgia, *Pokémon Sun & Moon* is an exhaustive adventure.** With over 800 Pokémon to catch and a talking Pokédex to ignore, an all-new region to explore and with hours of trials and tribulations to dispatch, the idea of participating at all can seem a little exhausting. This is the seventh generation of *Pokémon* games, after all; careful iteration on Game Freak's part has ensured that we've come to receive careful refinement over sweeping reinvention of the format, a new lick of paint on a familiar, rusted experience.

But that's what makes *Pokémon Sun & Moon* so deserving of your attention. This is the closest we've come to an overhaul, as Game Freak ushers in some of the most important changes to the series in years; the games delight with their gorgeous, sprawling Hawaii-inspired island-challenges, new mechanical additions, streamlined game systems and a story that won't make you wish you could go back in time and cast HM01 on your eye-sockets.

So endearing is this adventure that the idea of once again abandoning your family to go on a whirlwind journey, befriending strangers, maiming feral monsters only to trap them in small, magical cages – later forcing them to battle in a vague attempt to gross fame and fortune versus other wayward children – isn't just entertaining, but fresh in a way that will recall your earliest memories with the franchise.

*Sun & Moon* is a more streamlined experience than its most recent predecessors, easing in newcomers and veterans alike – while offering just enough depth in the post-game to keep aspiring Pokémon Masters engaged. No longer are you stuck on a quest to collect eight gym badges, instead you are now cast in an adventure to discover the pleasantries of the new island, while overcoming various, fun trials and toppling four powerful Kahuna trainers before you can stop off to catch legendary Pokémon and save the world from whatever convoluted force is threatening to end it this time around. It's fun and fresh, but it's still *Pokémon*, familiar flaws and all.

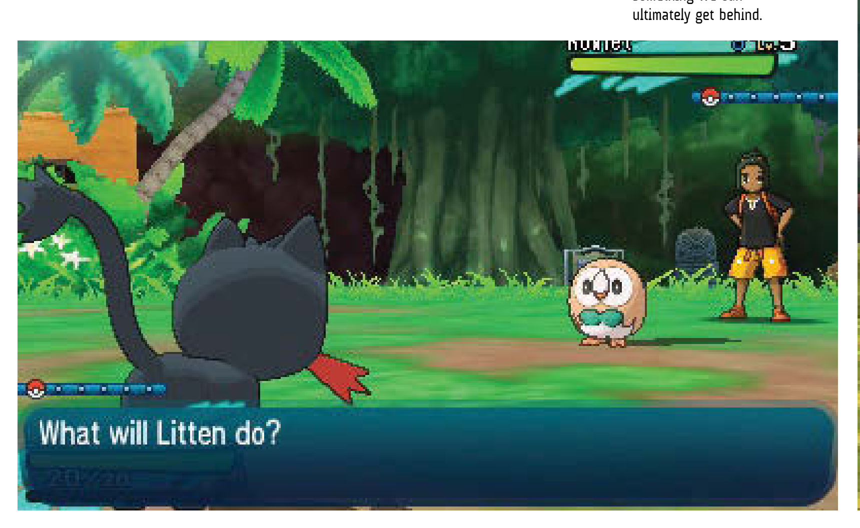
But it's easy to overlook some of the more laboured ideas of the franchise as *Sun & Moon* removes the need to internalise the now-numerous Pokémon types and intricacies to the rock-paper-scissors combat. Traversing the world is made easier as a detailed map appears on the 3DS' bottom screen, while a new Pokémon Pager system forgoes the hassle of having to keep Pokémon with integral abilities (such as Fly, Rock Smash and Surf) on hand at all times. That means *Sun & Moon* is perhaps a little more linear than some vets will be accustomed to, but that also makes for a more focused adventure; if you're coming in for the first time off the back of *Pokémon Go* – or perhaps a decade of lapsed play – it'll ease you into everything it has to offer gradually. *Sun & Moon* is, ultimately, a game about building friendships and that is a theme that carries through into the approachable presentation and pacing.

The core battling system is still as entertaining as it has always been, offering just enough tactical variety to keep you and your

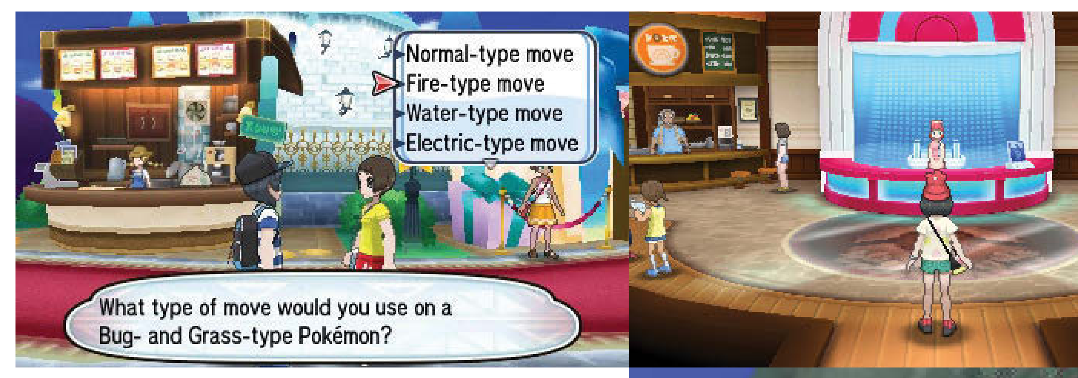
**DETAILS**

**FORMAT:** 3DS
**ORIGIN:** Japan
**PUBLISHER:** The Pokémon Company
**DEVELOPER:** Game Freak
**PRICE:** £34.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1-4
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

Below: games™ needs to make it known that of the three starter Pokémon, Litten is the best boy. Adorable, powerful and it looks like he's wearing little socks, now that's something we can ultimately get behind.




Below: Game Freak has put more emphasis than ever in *Pokémon Sun & Moon*. You play as an 11-year old kid whose family has just moved to Alola from Kanto, on a quest to find friendship and understand the plight of the people and their Pokémon.




**FAQs**

**Q. CAN I TRADE OLD POKÉMON IN?**
At launch, no. Though Game Freak will add in the capability for you to trade in Pokémon from last generation games in the New Year.

**Q. WHO IS THE BESTEST?**
It doesn't matter how many new Pokémon Game Freak introduces, Pikachu is still the cutest of them all; if only we could have him out in the game world with us.

**Q. CAN I CATCH 'EM ALL?**
Can you? Of course! Should you? That's a different question entirely. With hundreds to catch, breed and evolve, it's one hell of a time commitment these days.




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**Left:** Expect to find a diverse array of Pokémon scattered across the region. Veterans will be delighted to see many of the original 150 make an appearance on the road well travelled early on.

## MULTIPLAYER ACTION

Many of the multiplayer systems have been carried across from *X* and *Y*, with small improvements only serving to make battles and trading smoother than ever. The Global Trade and Wonder Trade systems ensure that trading Pokémon with friends and strangers alike couldn't be made any easier, while an improved netcode helps provide a better spine to the various battle options. That said, *Sun & Moon* is still ultimately restricted by one of the worst things to ever blight multiplayer gaming, with Nintendo's ridiculously convoluted Friends List system still causing unnecessary stress and disruption. Game Freak has taken some steps to trying and alleviate this, holding all multiplayer activities in a separate Festival Plaza area, though it's Nintendo's archaic multiplayer conditions that will ultimate hold newcomers and veterans alike from fully enjoying the suite of battling options.




ever-evolving team on your toes. The battles are spectacular, vibrant and electrifying – albeit infrequently disrupted by framerate dips – but it's also here where some of the largest changes have come into play. *Sun & Moon* tracks attack-move effectiveness after your very first encounter with a Pokémon, meaning those of you with poor memories will no longer need to keep a notebook to hand in an effort to chart which of your moves will be Super Effective or a waste of time. Given the amount of new Pokémon types that have been put into play over the years – not to mention the introduction of Z-Crystals (which further expand particular move sets) and region specific evolutions – this handy trick removes one of the more obtuse aspects of play and the game is all the better because of it.

### CONNECTED
#### EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

**WONDER TRADE:** Wonder Trade lets you trade random Pokémon with a random player. You might just be surprised by what you get, relying on the kindness of strangers!

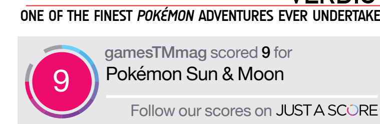
One area of the battle system that's proved to be divisive is the introduction of a "call for help" mechanic, which sees weakened wild Pokémon cry out for assistance from other local Pokémon. It can be a pain, further attributing long grass with tedium, but it also throws some surprisingly challenging twists to some otherwise laborious encounters. It, much like many of the trials, trainer and multiplayer battles, forces you to think up new strategies in the heat of battle; developing new plays and ways to utilise your team for the most effective methods of combat.

Building a well-rounded team is still the heart of the *Pokémon* experience; the quest to catch 'em all takes a slight backseat due to the impressiveness of the battles and the ridiculous amount of spaces to be filled in the Pokédex. Though, we have to admit, we began to forgo the tactical advantages of certain Pokémon and began to compile a squad of the cutest Pokémon available. Listen, when a game lets you waste hours petting your cutest captures (this does have some impact on combat effectiveness and prowess, we promise!) it's no surprise that this ended up being the case.

Ultimately, *Sun & Moon* feels like one of the first legitimately necessary *Pokémon* adventures in some time. With the franchise celebrating its twentieth anniversary, Game Freak has delivered an adventure that pays homage to the very first quest through the Kanto region while still delivering something fun and exciting. Be you an adult or child, *Pokémon Sun & Moon* is still the ultimate RPG; the surface adventure is wonderful and engaging, but beneath the surface is still a wildly complex body of systems that allow the game to expand and support deep strategic play. That's the power of *Pokémon*, it's a game that everybody could, and probably should, enjoy.

## VERDICT

ONE OF THE FINEST *POKÉMON* ADVENTURES EVER UNDERTAKEN





THE EVIL WITHIN

# Tyranny

**Obsidian has gone and carved itself a beautiful little niche.** Sure, *Pillars Of Eternity* might've cashed in on the nostalgia of the likes of *Baldur's Gate* but it also proved there was still a demand for exactly that sort of RPG. When armed with such knowledge, well, it's hardly a surprise that we'd see further use of the developer's all-new Infinity Engine. The first such title is *Tyranny*, and if you've played *Pillars Of Eternity* you'll mostly know what to expect.

That's not a criticism, mind; it was a well-loved RPG romp, but there is a lot of familiarity here. Don't mistake that to mean that there are no changes or improvements, combat is subtly changed, levelling up works slightly differently and there are myriad other tweaks to justify this new game's existence. There are some key features, however, primary among them being the fact that you are, in fact, playing on the side of evil in this tale. It's an intriguing proposition and one that has been handled well with the game's writing. You're not an out and out cliché villain, beheading folk for giggles, instead it's more subdued and gives you a greater sense of character.

This acts as the leverage point for much of the game's decision making, too, giving you a real sense that your decisions will have an impact, and they do. Your actions will always affect something, though sometimes it's enough to say the right thing in conversation. Admittedly it can be confusing to understand the underlying systems, which might sound too metaplayer for the point of such a feature but when every reaction to your choices is given a prompt on-screen, it's impossible to not feel like trying to purposefully guide the game more to your liking.

It's a testament to the quality of writing and the tangible feeling that your choices matter that you'll be quite happy to restart upon completion to see how things might've played out on the other side of a tricky situation. The criticism here comes from the short runtime of the game, a necessary drawback of a title emphasising choice. This bitter pill could be swallowed well enough if not for the abrupt close, which comes from a sudden ending and a number of explicit story details that just don't get explored. It feels a little cynical, like a forced cliffhanger simply for the hopes of dangling the sequelised carrot before CRPG fans - especially when *Tyranny* costs the same as the longer, more rounded *Pillars Of Eternity*.

It may sound like the weight of the game's criticism lies too heavily on its story, but that's where Obsidian has decided to focus its efforts. It doesn't do anything to ultimately spoil what is a great classic-style RPG, and should be considered if you enjoyed *Pillars Of Eternity* but wouldn't consider classic RPGs your typical sort of gaming experience.

## DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PC
**ORIGIN:** US
**PUBLISHER:** Paradox Interactive
**DEVELOPER:** Obsidian Entertainment
**PRICE:** £34.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1
**MINIMUM SPEC:** Windows 7 64-bit OS, 2.80 GHz quad core CPU, 6GB RAM, 1GB GPU, 15GB HDD space
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A

BETTER THAN



DRAGON AGE 2

WORSE THAN



PILLARS OF ETERNITY

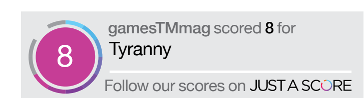
## FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**BAD TO THE BONE:** Playing on the side of evil is a unique twist that hasn't been handled in this way before, and that alone is a reason to give this one a try.

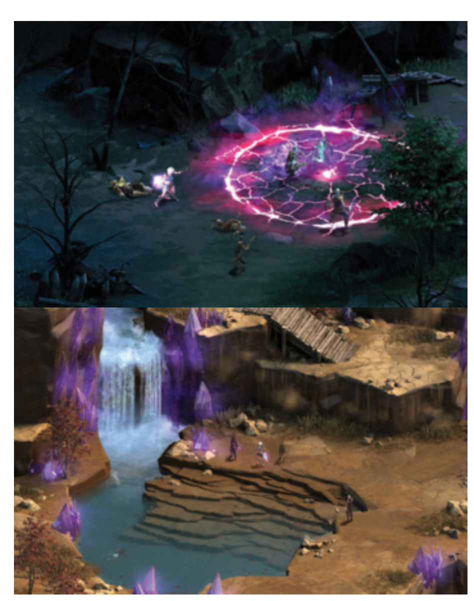



IT SEEMS THE CLASSIC RPG IS HERE TO STAY






Above: It's possible to check on the reputations you have and how you've affected them, which is good because often you'll affect a huge array of reputations and it can be tough to track them all at once.



DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PS4
**ORIGIN:** Japan
**PUBLISHER:** PQube
**DEVELOPER:** Arc System Works
**PRICE:** £49.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1-32
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

THE GAMES GET BETTER AS THE NAMES GET WEIRDER

# BlazBlue: Central Fiction

**While the quality and breadth of content continues to improve with every increasingly ludicrously-titled *BlazBlue* game, it's getting harder and harder to recommend them to fellow gamers.** That's no slight on the excellent job Arc System Works does every single time, but perhaps rather on the frequency with which these updates come – *Chronophantasma Extend* is barely a year old and having seen the success of download-based upgrades in the likes of *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat* and *Killer Instinct*, *BlazBlue*'s release model just feels dated.

That's not to say that the new stuff isn't good, because it really is. The new characters have some really interesting gimmicks and mechanics to explore (Nine The Phantom is the fighting game equivalent of *Monster Hunter*'s Hunting Horn, stacking different special moves and effects based on what normal attacks she lands and in what order… and yes, it's really as awesome and confusing as it sounds), gameplay refinements add new offensive tools and the reworked Stylish mode acts as a much better gateway into both game and genre for fresh or lapsed players of fighting games.

If you enjoy fighters and (somehow) still don't have a *BlazBlue* game in your collection, *Central Fiction* is an easy recommendation in terms of quality, but given that you can pick up last year's game for a fraction of the price, the new one can't be said to be great value for money by comparison, despite its evident quality. Another solid improvement, then, but it's surely time for a more radical shake-up to this great franchise with a 'proper' sequel.

BETTER THAN: ARCANA HEART 3 LOVE MAX!!!!!

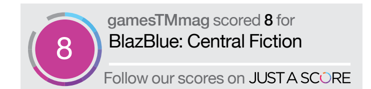
WORSE THAN: BLAZBLUE CHRONOPHANTASMA EXTEND



**Above:** This continues to be one of the most vibrant and visually engaging fighters around with some truly stunning backdrops as well as great fighting animations.




ANOTHER ITERATIVE IMPROVEMENT



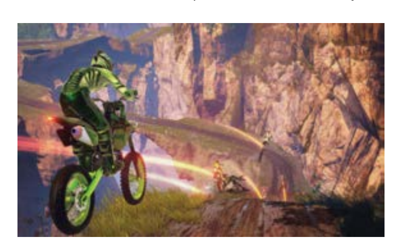

STUCK IN THE MUD

# Moto Racer 4

**When even the best arcade racers are struggling to make waves in the modern gaming scene, what hope does a C-tier offering like *Moto Racer* really have at success?** More importantly, does something like this even *deserve* success? There's no one element of *Moto Racer 4* that can be said to be excellent, and only a few that even manage to hit the 'adequate' benchmark – it's light on content, underwhelming visually, and physics are unpredictable, especially in off-road events. Road races are where the game is at its best but the aforementioned dirt tracks are riddled with problems. Arcade-style handling feels sloppy here and course design is generally pretty awful, a flaw flagged up as early as the very first big jump on the very first course – although you're encouraged to get big air and hit some sick tricks while you're up there, a huge log tunnel has been plonked right in the middle of the landing zone, leading to more clips and crashes (and therefore tiresome restarts) than clean landings.

While seldom as bad as that elsewhere, *Moto Racer 4* just generally feels amateurish and fairly empty. Just as puzzle games lost all perceived value and tumbled from full-price products to being super-cheap (or even free) over the years, arcade racers now typically inhabit the lower end of the digital pricing spectrum unless they're as loaded with content as, say, a *Forza Horizon* or *Burnout* title. *Moto Racer 4* isn't, nor does it deserve to share sentence space with such genre legends. It fills a novel niche and seems to function properly most of the time, but those are pretty much the nicest things you can really say about it.

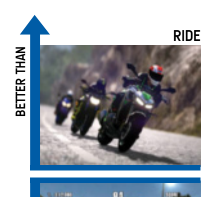
Attempts to get motorbike racing titles going continue to flounder. We're not even sure what a truly great bike game would look like anymore.






**FORMAT:** PS4
**ORIGIN:** France
**PUBLISHER:** Microïds
**DEVELOPER:** Anuman
**PRICE:** £34.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1-10
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

BETTER THAN: RIDE

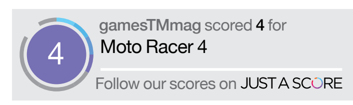


WORSE THAN: BURNOUT 2: POINT OF IMPACT





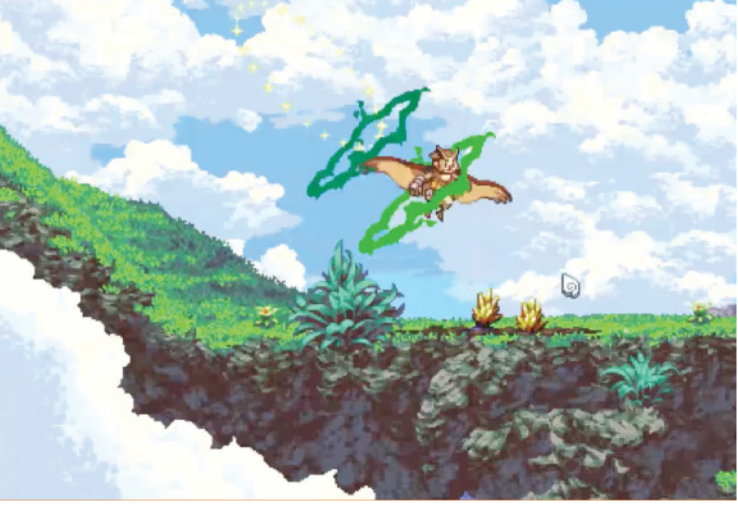

ENTIRELY UNREMARKABLE



A REAL HOOT

# Owlboy





Above: Collecting finite rings may feel old school, but unlike games of a similar ilk, you don't have to "spend" them to power up. Each time you hit 500 or 750 etc., you'll get a new reward.

**Stuffed into every crevice of *Owlboy* – sewn into every segment, pressed into every pixel – is a warmth and charm rarely paralleled.** It's taken nine years to get this game as the developers wanted it - nine years of sweat and shine - and while we've learned the hard way to be cautious of games that sit in development for years, we're delighted to say there's no need for such cynicism here; wow, does that nine years of polish show.

This story unwinds as a 2D platformer, and won't feel unfamiliar if you've ever spent time with a certain plumber. Your tale unfurls across a beautifully bold, pixel-perfect world that feels at once both retro and contemporary thanks to its masterful use of sound and visuals. It's a traditional game of dungeons and temples and boss fights and platforming, but one delivered with effortless grace. Nothing's cheesy. There's no filler or padding. This is a carefully-crafted saga with a stunning story and a you-won't-see-it-coming twist.

The opening tutorial – which serves chiefly to showcase your ineptitude – is a brief but potent glimpse into life as Otus, a shy, introverted owl-boy mute from birth. It's a story about failure, of broken expectations, of being told that you're stupid so many times, the mantra starts to feel true. Otus doesn't have many abilities in his arsenal, but he can fly, roll, and spin, and as you team up with a misfit band of Otus' friends, you'll be able to access a variety of additional skills that keep the gameplay fresh. There are no laborious escort missions either; thanks to the ingenious teleportation feature, you can literally pull your pal from the fresh air whenever you need them.

The world is big and varied, yes, but it's no sandbox, and most of your time will be spent pondering environmental puzzles and experimenting with your – and your allies' – skills. Your enemies, while not easy exactly, can usually be toppled with a little creativity. The twin-stick approach took a while to get accustomed to, but the auto-aim means you can usually chop down foes quickly and competently. It becomes trickier if you're surrounded – the reticle doesn't know where the hell to point – but it works more often than it doesn't.

*Owlboy* doesn't try too hard. It doesn't force the jokes, or over-complicate the puzzles. Does that mean they're easy? Nope, not even slightly. *Portal*-esque in its capacity to make you feel simultaneously brilliant and braindead, the puzzles are smart, often building on those that went before. Checkpoints are plentiful, and you'll rarely have to replay a section.

There are some who hark back to the 16-bit days with excess nostalgia, but there's no need for that here. *Owlboy*'s deceivingly simplistic delivery belies an enviable narrative, tourniquet-tight gameplay, and a cast you'll fall in love with. Don't miss it.

## DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PC
**ORIGIN:** Norway
**PUBLISHER:** D-Pad Studio
**DEVELOPER:** In-house
**PRICE:** £18.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1
**MINIMUM SPEC:** Windows 7/8/10/Vista, Dual Core Processor, 1 GB RAM, DirectX 9.0c graphics card, 600 MB available space, Windows Media Player
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A

BETTER THAN SHU



WORSE THAN SUPER MARIO BROS.

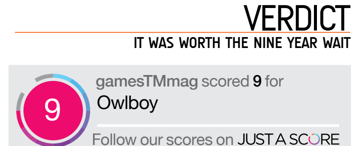
## FINGERPRINT

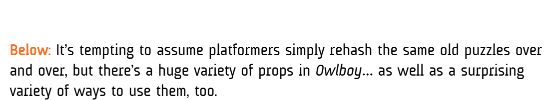
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**QUIETLY CONVINCING:** A perfect blend of humour and gravitas, you rarely encounter a game that successfully conveys so much with so little (and with no audible dialogue at all).

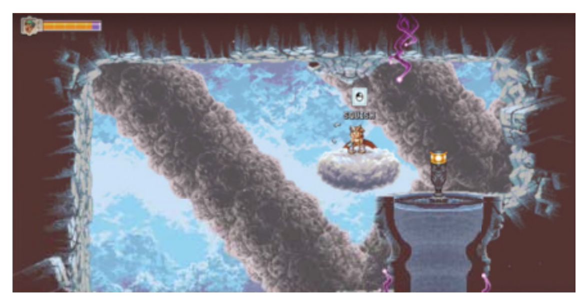
## VERDICT

IT WAS WORTH THE NINE YEAR WAIT



Below: It's tempting to assume platformers simply rehash the same old puzzles over and over, but there's a huge variety of props in *Owlboy*… as well as a surprising variety of ways to use them, too.





DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PSVR
**ORIGIN:** Germany
**PUBLISHER:** Crytek
**DEVELOPER:** In-house
**PRICE:** £54.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A

PROPERLY WALKING WITH DINOSAURS

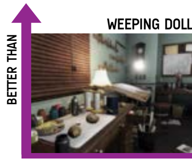
# Robinson: The Journey

**Trust Crytek to deliver the most phenomenally convincing virtual world that we've seen on PSVR to date.** From the moment you step out of your crash-landed pod, to coming face-to-face with a gigantic T-Rex, Robinson's sense of scale and place constantly blows you away. The world young protagonist Robin finds himself stranded on feels incredibly real, so much so that it feels like an actual place you've visited. So real is this convincingly constructed VR world (which looks even more luscious if you have access to a PS4 Pro) you'll want to explore every last nook and cranny of it. But the further you explore, the more flaws you'll discover in Crytek's clever house of cards.

From a gameplay point of view, *Robinson* inevitably disappoints. Like *Batman*, it utilises a point-and-click style approach, allowing you to interact with certain parts of the world in order to solve simple tasks like clearing dams or rescuing trapped dinosaurs. It's also possible to climb certain rock faces, swing on vines and you can even create bridges to navigate harsh environments. As you explore *Robinson*'s hub-like locations, you're aided and abetted by HIGGS a friendly robot who gives you random pieces of useful advice, and Laika, an affectionate baby T-Rex who'll occasionally help you by retrieving things. Scanning is another significant mechanic, and a useful one, as it allows you to piece together Robin's plight and encourages you to seek out and identify the animals that share the world with you.

*Robinson* feels hideously overpriced at £55, but it's still a VR game that we recommend you experience. There are only three to four hours of gameplay on offer, but they're some of the most exhilarating hours you'll ever experience as a gamer. Just make sure you have strong VR legs.

BETTER THAN



WEEPING DOLL

WORSE THAN

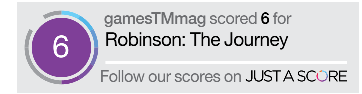


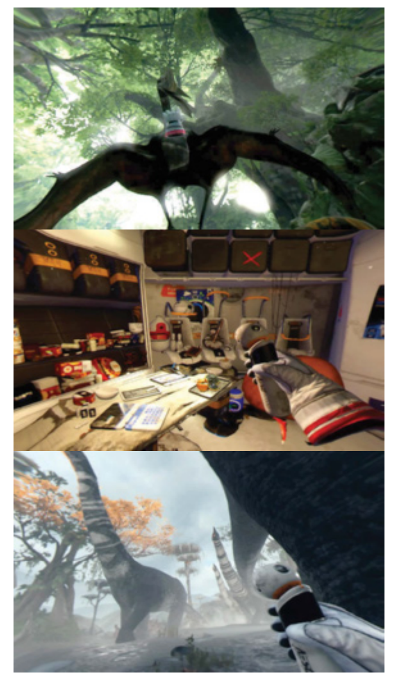
BATMAN ARKHAM VR



## VERDICT

HIGH ON SPECTACLE, LOW ON SUBSTANCE



**Above:** Set-pieces are incredibly impactful, but arguably one of its best is when you find yourself stuck in a herd of Longnecks. The sense of scale as you try and dodge gigantic feet makes for a true heart-in-your-mouth moment.

UBISOFT'S FIRST VR GAME IS A SOARING SUCCESS

# Eagle Flight

DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PSVR
**OTHER FORMATS:** VIVE, Oculus Rift
**ORIGIN:** Canada
**PUBLISHER:** Ubisoft
**DEVELOPER:** Ubisoft Montreal
**PRICE:** £34.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1 (2-6 Online)
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** Yes

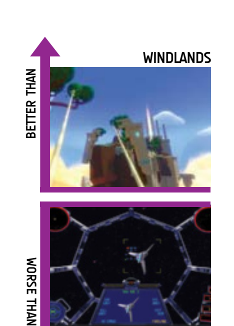
**If *Robinson* highlights how convincing VR worlds can be, then *Eagle Flight* represents the sheer freedom of escape they can offer.** Soaring over the remnants of a human-deserted Paris is not only joyous, but also exhilarating, liberating and delightful. Plummeting towards the ground only to pull up at the last moment, whip through the tangled branches of a tree and then dive through a shattered building is an experience that's as unique to *Eagle Flight* as it is satisfyingly easy to pull off. Ubisoft Montreal's control method is simplicity in itself - look to move, tilt your head to turn - and is the most motion sickness free experience we've had so far.

Of course, *Eagle Flight*'s sensational freedom of movement would be for nothing if there wasn't a game to back it up, but fortunately, Ubisoft Montreal delivers. The gameplay is admittedly simple, ranging from speed chases through *Pilotwings*-styled hoops, to fish collecting and death defying races through Paris' underground, but there's enough here to keep the boredom at bay. Score chasers will love *Eagle Flight*'s three-star scoring system, as the difficulty ramps up quite quickly. While it's relatively simple to breeze through the 24 chapter story mode, it's a different matter to get maximum points on them and they're enjoyable enough that you'll want to return to complete them all. Add in the fact that additional challenges get unlocked as more stars are earned and *Eagle Flight* offers a surprising amount of replay value.

Being an Ubisoft game, *Eagle Flight* is filled with numerous unlockables to find, but here it never feels like a chore. It's incredibly satisfying to seek out those hidden treats and the world is built in such a clever way that you'll always want to fly off the beaten track to discover what the developers have hidden. *Eagle Flight*'s multiplayer mode is also highly enjoyable, requiring you to take out the opposing team, while taking your prey to a nearby nest. It's a pity then that there are so few people online to play it with.

BETTER THAN

WINDLANDS

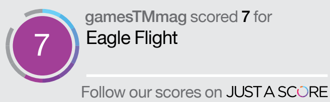


WORSE THAN

STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER

## VERDICT

SIMPLISTIC IN SCOPE, BUT OH SO SATISFYING TO PLAY





JUST GOTTA RIDE IT

# Planet Coaster

**It's only after serious analysis that you realise games like these bring out the worst in people.** In the time we spent with *Planet Coaster* we charged customers to use the toilet, a basic human right. We charged them for the privilege of first aid facilities, a fundamental requirement of any tourist attraction. We built labyrinthine networks of pathways, each of them with an expensive ride at one end, and an ATM (that charges you, like the ones outside the pub) at the other.

The fact that we could so easily lose ourselves in a quagmire of avarice and immorality is indicative of how free you feel when you boot up *Planet Coaster.* A vast selection of unique and demanding scenarios in Career mode and the infinite wealth and possibilities granted to you in Sandbox mode offer scores of hours of enjoyment at the most basic of levels, before you have the chance to really slip into the micromanagement, obsession with cash flow, and wild, irresponsible roller-coaster designs that are part and parcel of games like this one.

Even if you've never played the old *Rollercoaster Tycoon* games of yesteryear, *Planet Coaster* will be easy enough to jump into. It's immediately accessible, not only thanks to well thought-out menu systems and handy tutorials, but by its very nature this is a pick-up-and-play game – whether you've got 30 minutes spare before work or school, or you've settled in for an enormous session. The huge progress made in research trees and a formidable suite of terrain-sculpting tools and building materials truly mean that the creativity available to you is endless.

That's the key here, really – go wild with a giant toy box that Frontier has expertly curated. You only need check out the Steam Workshop page to see how in-depth the game's tools are, and the breadth of big roller-coaster design projects you can pump time into. Some of the pre-designed Career parks are beautifully put together and provide real inspiration for when you're ready to dive into Sandbox mode.

Add to this the fact that *Planet Coaster* is a genuine looker even at Medium settings, and that it functions pretty much without fault, and you've got one of 2016's surprise hits on your hands. There's an enormous amount of game here for only £29.99, with the varied Career scenarios being the real highlight – they require the patience and intelligence that can easily be lost in world builders, while providing enough of a challenge in different areas to satisfy hardcore players. There's a cheerfulness to *Planet Coaster* that feels like a breath of fresh air, too, and the attention to detail in terms of little character animations and roller-coaster customisation is quite staggering. It won't be for everyone, but *Planet Coaster* will satiate the thirst of legacy players and will pleasantly surprise any newcomers to the genre.

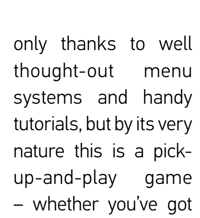
**DETAILS**

**FORMAT:** PC
**ORIGIN:** UK
**PUBLISHER:** Frontier Developments
**DEVELOPER:** In-house
**PRICE:** £29.99
**RELEASE:** Out now
**PLAYERS:** 1
**MINIMUM SPEC:** Windows 7 (SP1) or newer, Intel Core i5-2300/AMD FX-4300, 8GB RAM, 2GB GPU, 8GB HDD space, DirectX 11
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A

BETTER THAN: ZOO TYCOON

AS GOOD AS: ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON





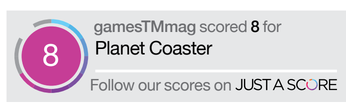
# ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

**NEW HORIZONS:** Frontier's new game feels vastly superior to everything similar that's come before, if only because it was lucky enough to be released in 2016. Better tech has resulted in a much deeper experience.

## VERDICT

**AN ADDICTIVE GAME FROM A PASSIONATE TEAM**






WHO SAID IMMORTALITY WAS ETERNAL?

YESTERDAY ORIGINS

OUT NOW!






AVAILABLE FROM amazon.co.uk & GAME










PS4




PENDULO STUDIOS




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WHY I ♥...

## S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

DAN PINCHBECK, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE CHINESE ROOM

*"S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is the best first-person game ever made. And it is still in everything we do, because it's the game which just goes 'or we could just leave you alone and let your imagination do all of the work'. There's just something really, really extraordinarily powerful about it. My saddest day in my 43-year-old life as a game developer and game fan was when they cancelled S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2. One day, I still live in hope that someone is going to pick that IP up and run with it and do something special. And if it's us I won't complain."*

**"There's just something really, really extraordinarily powerful about it"**
DAN PINCHBECK, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE CHINESE ROOM



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# RETRO

NO.182






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# THE RETRO GUIDE TO...




Geoff Brown's company specialised in bringing US-based games to the UK. **games**™ revisits the many titles that defined US Gold

US GOLD IS one of the most unusual companies that we've covered here, as it was a publisher first and foremost. Founded in Birmingham by Geoff Brown, the company specialised in acting as a bridge between the UK and the United States, bringing the cream of the US crop to the rapidly expanding UK games audience. Geoff's connections with arcade developers also ensured that US Gold had lucrative deals with a number of important coin-op companies, including Data East, Sega and Capcom. As a result, some of the biggest Christmas games in US Gold's line-up consisted of popular conversions such as *Out Run* (which sadly varied in quality depending on version). The company was a huge success in the 8-bit and 16-bit years, but struggled with the move to 32-bit consoles and was eventually acquired by Eidos. Here's a selection of its most famous titles





## BEACH HEAD 1983

**VARIOUS**

This early effort from Access Software typified the quality of many of US Gold's early games. Coded by the late Bruce Carver and set in World War II, *Beach Head* was a highly immersive action-based war simulator that saw you shooting down enemies, taking out opposing tanks and fending off strikes from incoming battleships. Slickly coded and featuring some decent visuals, it's effectively a range of smaller minigames with a focus on shooting action at its core. It became a huge success for both Access Software and US Gold, and was followed up two years later with the ominously titled *Beach Head II: The Director Strikes Back*.





## BRUCE LEE 1984

**AMSTRAD, SPECTRUM**

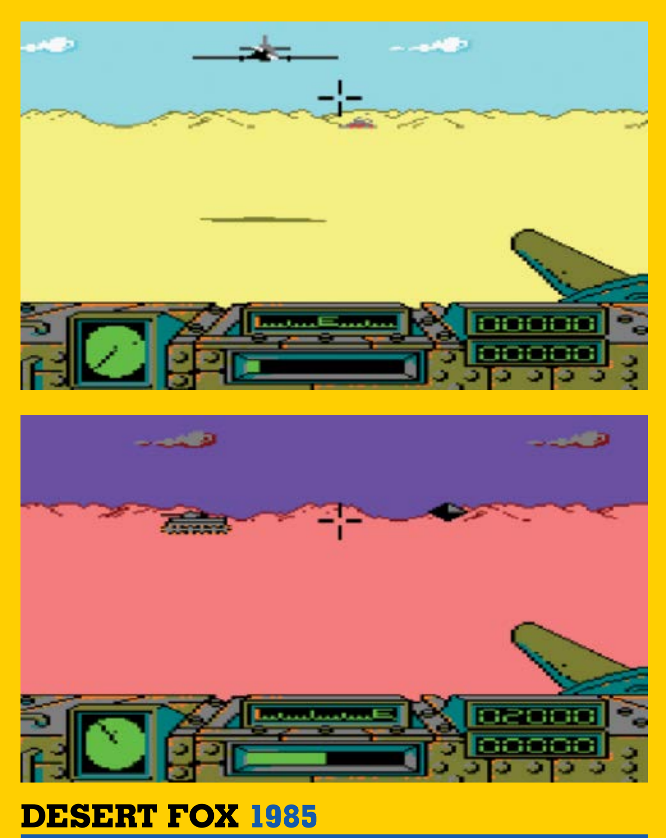
This fun platform-cum-fighting game was originally released for the Atari 8-bit and Commodore 64, but US Gold picked the rights up for systems like the Spectrum and Amstrad. Playing as Bruce Lee, the player had to traverse a number of chambers collecting numerous hanging lanterns. Progress to certain areas was blocked off until a set number of lanterns had been collected, and later chambers introduced a number of dangerous hazards that Bruce had to deal with. The player's problems were compounded by the addition of a deadly ninja and gigantic warrior called the Green Yamo, which followed them around, requiring several kicks and punches before they could be defeated. Fast-paced and with small but nicely detailed sprites, *Bruce Lee* still holds up today and is highly recommended.




## RAID OVER MOSCOW 1985

**VARIOUS**

The Cold War was a great source for entertainment when it came to books and movies, and videogames were no exception. Access Software's Bruce Carver saw the potential for a game based around the continuing conflict and created another multistage war effort in the vein of *Beach Head* that went down a storm with gamers.



## DESERT FOX 1985

**VARIOUS**

Another war-based effort from US Gold, this time based around trying to defeat Rommel, the titular Desert Fox. Adopting an early 3D approach, you must traverse the desert in your tank, saving depots and fending off the attacks of incoming Stukas and tanks. Noted at the time for its impressive voice synthesis and some terrifying night stages, *Desert Fox* was short on variety but heavy on action. Needless to say, its Nazi-themed focus meant that it was never available to buy in Germany.

## WINTER GAMES 1985

### VARIOUS

Epyx was another well known associate of US Gold, with Geoff Brown's company publishing many of its games. One of its most well known franchises was the *Games* series, and *Winter Games* remains one of our favourites. Up to eight players could compete, across an impressive eight events, including Alpine skiing, bobsled, figure skating, ski jumping, luge, freestyle skiing, speed skating and the stamina-sapping biathlon. *Winter Games* featured tight, responsive controls, some rather impressive visuals (particularly on the C64) and plenty of variety, with few duff events. It veered away from simple joystick waggling too, meaning you needed more than fast reactions to beat your friends.







## KUNG FU MASTER 1986

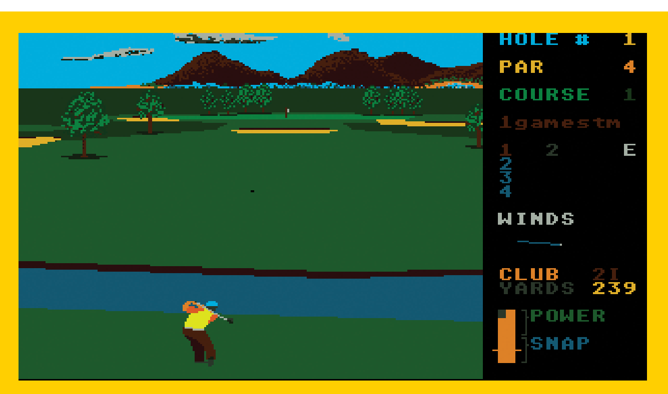
### VARIOUS

US Gold secured rights to several Data East arcade games, including the Irem-developed *Kung Fu Master*. The original arcade game was a fast-paced scrolling fighter in which you beat off hordes of enemies as you attempted to rescue your kidnapped girlfriend. The various home computer versions lack the frantic speed of the original, but still put up a decent fight, particularly the Amstrad offering, although you might want to steer clear of David Anderson's rather disappointing Spectrum port.










## LEADERBOARD 1986

### VARIOUS

*Leaderboard* was another gem from Access Software and one of the best golf simulators on the market. Originally created for the C64, it featured four excellent courses, which included typical golfing hazards like water and sand traps, as well as excellent-looking visuals, especially on the 16-bit Atari St. It introduced many mechanics that would feature in later golf games and received an expansion set of four new courses later that same year.




## ACE OF ACES 1986

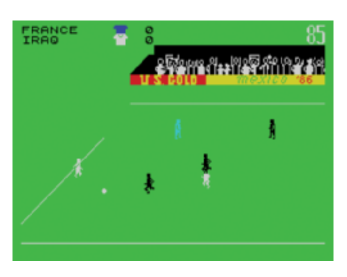
### VARIOUS



This rather excellent effort from Artech Digital Entertainment was a World War II flight simulator that was more concerned with delivering arcade-style frills than authenticity. While its controls inevitably suffered due to the simplicity of joysticks at the time, *Ace Of Aces* still worked well thanks to the variety of missions, five distinct view options and some truly satisfying aerial combat. It was relatively realistic too, with additional loadouts lowering the top speed of your fighter. Its success on the C64 led to many other ports, including one for Sega's Master System. Sadly, it's a terrible port that's best forgotten about, in our opinion.

> **"SADLY, NOT EVERYTHING US GOLD TOUCHED TURNED TO… AHEM, GOLD"**




## WORLD CUP CARNIVAL 1986

### VARIOUS

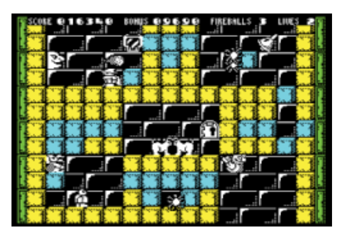
Sadly, not everything US Gold touched turned to… ahem, gold. *World Cup Carnival* is one of the industry's earliest examples of a game failing to live up to its hype, and it's notable for the sheer amount of naff tat sold with it (including a World Cup wallchart and poster) to make it seem more valuable (sound familiar?). Based on the 1986 FIFA World Cup, internal problems meant the planned game would not reach its lucrative window. Undeterred, US Gold dug up the rotting corpse of the crusty *World Cup Football* and shipped it out in the hope that no one would notice it had repackaged a two-year-old game. Needless to say, gamers were not amused.

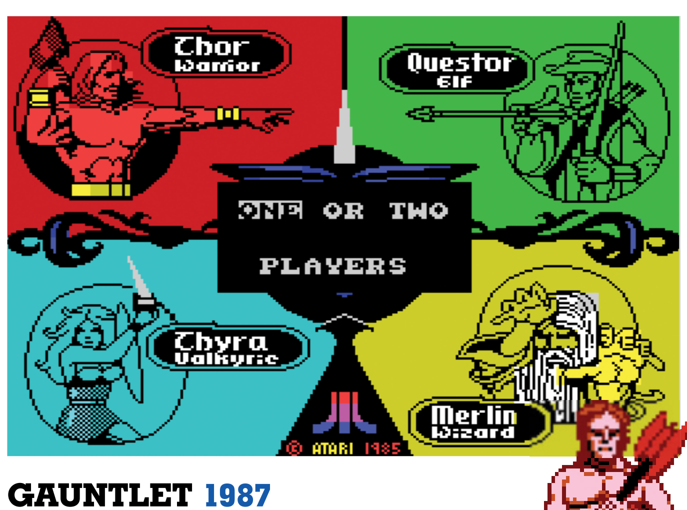
## SOLOMON'S KEY 1987

VARIOUS

Part platformer, part puzzle game, *Solomon's Key* is a relatively obscure arcade game that received some truly cracking ports from US Gold. Playing as the wizard Dana, the player must reach Solomon's key using a special wand to create and destroy blocks, blocking off enemies or destroying them. Once the key has been secured, Dana can move onto the next, even trickier stage.








## GAUNTLET 1987

VARIOUS

*Gauntlet* was one of Atari's most popular games at the time of its release, so US Gold quickly snapped up the rights. It delivered an impressive number of solid ports on the various home conversions, with only the Amiga missing out. All the key elements were included, although it only catered for two players on most systems. It was well regarded at the time of release and was complemented by *The Deeper Dungeons* add-on pack the same year.

## OUT RUN 1987

VARIOUS

Sega's *Out Run* was one of the hottest games of 1986, so US Gold did everything it could to snap up the rights. Sadly, it was so focused on throwing money at Sega it completely forgot to create an authentic home experience. All the home computer ports by the typically reliable Probe Software were uniformly terrible, with the Amstrad offering being so bad it reportedly made the editor of **Retro Gamer** cry when he opened it and later played it on Christmas Day.







# STE RUDDY TALKS GHOULS 'N GHOSTS

### The C64 coder discusses his excellent port



**How did you get to work on the conversion?**

Software Creations was doing a fair bit of work for US Gold and it was really just the next game I got following on from *LED Storm*. It was my last C64 game as I was doing more and more NES work.

**Had you played much of the game beforehand?**

Sadly not. I'd played *Ghosts 'N Goblins* to death but I hadn't seen *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* in the wild until well into the development of the game. By which time I was quite good at it, although not keen on paying to play!

**How much help did you receive from Capcom?**

We didn't get any, really. We received a board from US Gold and that was it. Fortunately it was one with a debug mode, so I do remember Andy Threlfall (the graphic artist) spending quite a lot of time staring at the test graphic pages. Apart from that it was just a case of playing the game over and over. It was a hard job, but someone had to do it.

**What were the trickiest parts of the game to replicate?**

Well, technically, it was a full-screen colour scroll. Chasing the raster to update the colour was always fun, with an optimised sprite multiplexor supporting some of the massive sprites that the game used. But, to be honest, just fitting the sodding thing into the memory of the C64 was probably the trickiest part of the port.

**What aspects of the port are you most proud of?**

Getting a playable interpretation of the arcade *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* using a joystick.

**And which parts do you wish you could improve?**

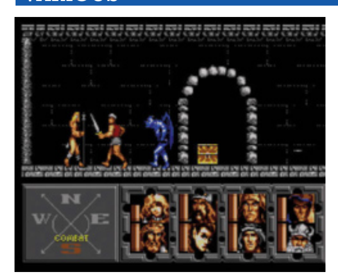
The most annoying thing was the fact that we were rushed right at the end to get it out. This meant some silly bugs slipped through. I'd have loved just a couple more weeks to fix 'em.

**How do you feel the port holds up today?**

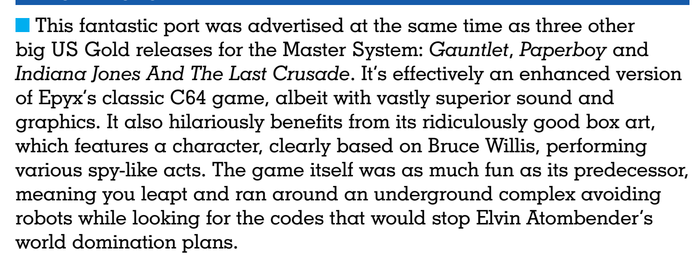
I think it's a good interpretation of the arcade game. The graphics are good, it's playable and has awesome music. That said, being a programmer, I look at it and think of all the things I could do better now.

## ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: HEROES OF THE LANCE 1988

VARIOUS



Unlike many *D&D* games of the time, *Heroes Of The Lance* was effectively a scrolling fighter with RPG elements. Authentically based around the popular book of the same name, *Heroes* allowed you to switch between eight character members on the fly, cast a variety of useful spells and use simple actions like 'give' and 'use'. It was a little clunky at times, but proved to be a huge success for US Gold.



## IMPOSSIBLE MISSION 1988

MASTER SYSTEM

This fantastic port was advertised at the same time as three other big US Gold releases for the Master System: *Gauntlet*, *Paperboy* and *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*. It's effectively an enhanced version of Epyx's classic C64 game, albeit with vastly superior sound and graphics. It also hilariously benefits from its ridiculously good box art, which features a character, clearly based on Bruce Willis, performing various spy-like acts. The game itself was as much fun as its predecessor, meaning you leapt and ran around an underground complex avoiding robots while looking for the codes that would stop Elvin Atombender's world domination plans.







## STRIDER 1989

VARIOUS

Capcom was another Japanese arcade developer that US Gold worked closely with, and *Strider* was one of its many home ports. Sadly, it was a pretty terrible one, too, with even the Atari ST and Amiga offerings failing to come anywhere near close to capturing the majesty and sheer spectacle of the arcade original. Practically all the home computer versions from Tiertex suffered poor reviews, but there was worse to come. Tiertex was able to do an exclusive sequel the following year and made an even bigger pig's ear of it, sullying the reputation of a great arcade game even further.

## CHIP'S CHALLENGE 1989

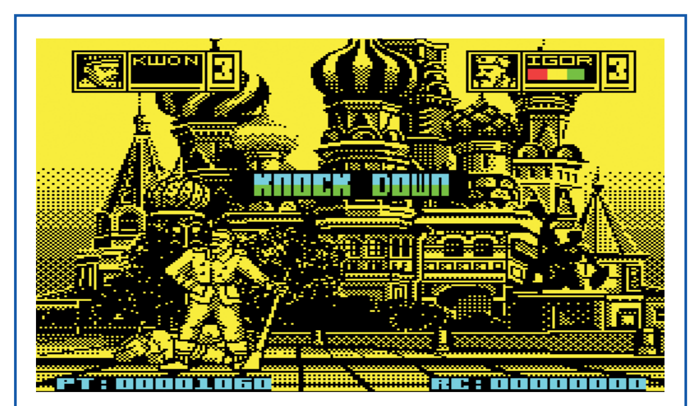
VARIOUS

Originally published by Atari in 1989 for the Atari Lynx, US Gold soon picked up publishing rights for the home computer versions, which were equally well received. Chuck Sommerville's entertaining puzzle game revolves around protagonist Chip, who is trying to gain membership of an exclusive club for brainiacs. As a result, the player must progress through 148 increasingly difficult puzzles, collecting a set number of chips before the exit will unlock. The beauty of Sommerville's game is that it's constantly throwing new ideas at you, and as a result, it never feels too boring or samey. Some stages focused on block-pushing, while others featured maze navigation, switch-tripping and elevators. The sheer variety of Sommerville's game meant there was always something new to discover, while the password-based progression system meant you never had to replay earlier stages unless you really wanted to.









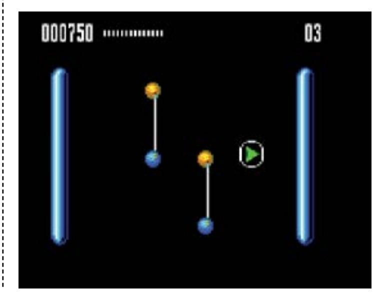

## HUMAN KILLING MACHINE 1989

VARIOUS

At the time of release, Tiertex's fighting game was dubbed the official sequel to Capcom's *Street Fighter*. While it was relatively well received on the Spectrum, thanks to its impressive looking visuals, it fared less well on other systems. Looking at it retrospectively, it's actually a truly terrible fighting game due to its naff mechanics, uninspiring character design and stiff, jerky animation. We do like that the final boss has a missile strapped to his back, though.

## E-MOTION 1990

VARIOUS




This interesting inertia-based puzzle game saw the player having to destroy a set number of coloured globes by knocking them into objects of the same colour. It sounds easy in practice, but the large number of globes, Asteroid-style movement of your ship, clever inertia and the fact different coloured balls would be banded together meant it was anything but.



## OUT RUN EUROPA 1991

VARIOUS

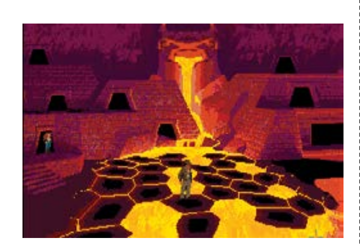
US Gold gave Probe another stab at the *Out Run* licence, after securing permission from Sega to create a separate home sequel. It was a big departure for the series, having more in common with *Chase HQ* and allowing the player to drive different vehicles across Europe in addition to the Ferrari that typically featured in the game. Sadly, like the original *Out Run*, it was a bit of a mess, being twitchy to control and dull to play.

## GAUNTLET III: THE FINAL ENCOUNTER 1991

VARIOUS

This interesting effort from Tengen was the second third *Gauntlet* game (the first being Gauntlet: *The Third Encounter* on Lynx). While it's ostensibly the same *Gauntlet* of old, the new isometric viewpoint meant it looked vastly different to its predecessors. It also added four additional characters, bringing the total available members to eight. Sadly, the isometric visuals, while striking, meant that enemies would often obscure where you were supposed to go.





## INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS 1992

VARIOUS

This clever point-and-click adventure game was originally based on an abandoned movie script called *Indiana Jones And The Monkey King*. Director Hal Barwood teamed up with Noah Falstein and came up with an alternate plot featuring Nazis, submarines and the legendary sunken city. Like *The Secret Of Monkey Island* (which was also published by US Gold), *Atlantis* featured great characters, clever puzzles and a superb story. It also included three ways of completing the game: Wits, Fists and Team.

## SCRABBLE 1993

AMIGA, ATARI ST

Don't laugh but this is a surprisingly great adaptation of the classic board game. Unlike earlier iterations of the game, there was enough memory to include all the words from the OSW dictionary (over 134,000 words if you're interested to know) and ensure that responses from the computer were exceptionally fast. 12 difficulty levels and a practice mode also ensured it would take a long time to beat.

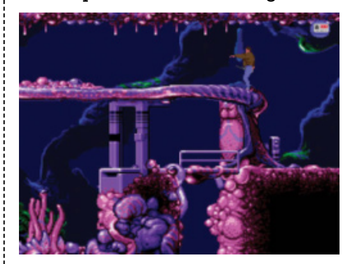


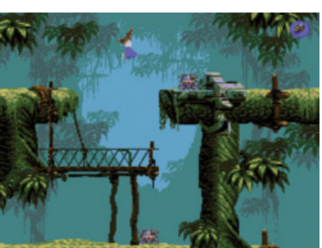


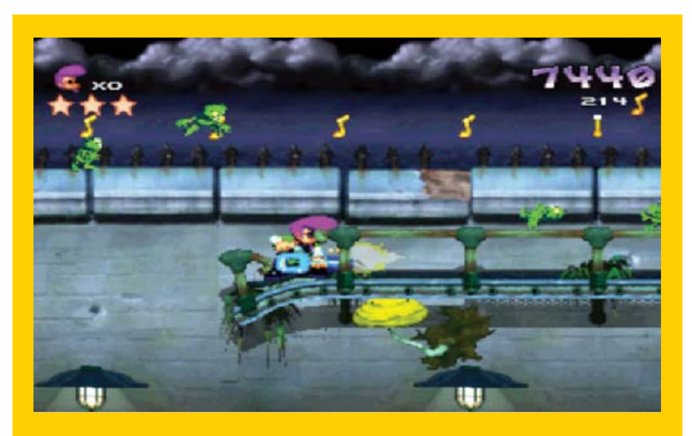
## FLASHBACK 1993

VARIOUS

Wrongly thought of as a sequel to *Another World*, this dramatic platform-cum-adventure game was a darling of the 16-bit period and still holds up today. Playing as amnesiac Conrad B Heart, you must recover your lost memory and work out why you've woken up in a mysterious jungle. Famed at the time for its cinematic cutscenes and stunning rotoscoped animation, *Flashback* made its debut on the Amiga but was actually created for the Mega Drive.



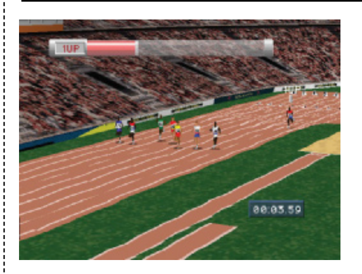




## JOHNNY BAZOOKATONE 1996

VARIOUS

Any game that features the main character desperately trying to retrieve his guitar from the clutches of an evil overlord certainly has our interest. Unfortunately, *Johnny Bazookatone*'s premise is the most interesting thing about it. It certainly controls well enough and has an interesting music-based theme (as well an extremely jazzy soundtrack) but its dour-looking levels and uninspiring level design make it a chore to play.





## OLYMPIC GAMES – ATLANTA '96 1996

VARIOUS

We'd love to say US Gold's final game saw the company go out on a high, but our mothers would never kiss our lying mouths again. Despite a large number of events to choose, it's ruined by rough-looking visuals, clunky controls and an insane difficulty curve on certain events. A truly disappointing swan song.

BEHIND THE SCENES

# WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS

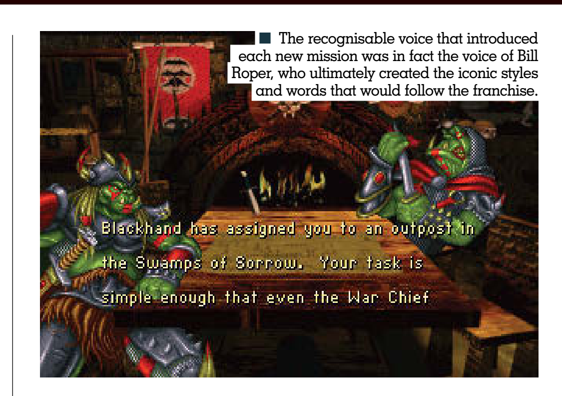
While Warcraft can't take all the credit for popularising the RTS, it's impossible to deny it the significant impact it had on the way the genre was played. games™ explores how Blizzard's biggest franchise was born




Released: 1994
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Key Staff: Bill Roper (producer/writer/voice acting), Michael Morhaime (senior programmer), Gregory Alper (composer)

**IT'S TOUGH TO IMAGINE AN INDUSTRY WITHOUT THE NAME 'WARCRAFT'.** As an MMO it has been running for 12 years now, with six huge expansion packs released over a decade that have helped to build a complete, ever-growing world for gamers to explore. Few games can claim to have continued to maintain a player base for so long, and fewer still can do so with a considerable amount of popularity. When attached to *Hearthstone*, that same world's most recognisable characters, creatures and abilities have been leveraged in one of the most popular digital trading card games yet known, proving a versatility in the brand that many could not have anticipated. Meanwhile, Blizzard's MOBA, *Heroes Of The Storm*, regularly recalls the *Warcraft* name as new heroes are added to the expanding roster of characters, drawing from a pool of characters from more than two decades of the franchise's history. This is the kind of variety not commonly seen from a videogame franchise, an adaptability that few brands dare to attempt let alone achieve. It's funny, then, to contemplate *Warcraft*'s origins as a risky title in an untested genre, and that this – the first major release from the then-newly renamed Blizzard Studios – would in fact lead to the developer's unrestricted triumph from then on.

"There was definitely a lot riding on the success of the game," says Bill Roper, one of the key developers on the original *Warcraft* RTS, "but more because it was the first to be published solely under the Blizzard name. Both *Blackthorne* and *The Death And Return of Superman* were coming out around the same time with Blizzard as the developer, but those games were published by Interplay and Sunsoft respectively. In fact, all of the previous games previously developed by Blizzard were for other publishers. So in that sense, *Warcraft* was going to define Blizzard as a publishing entity as well as a developer." Roper wore many hats on the project, coming on board initially as a voice actor before moving into writing the game's world and story then, ultimately, working as a producer on the original game. "I was already working for Blizzard on a contract basis," he explains, adding that he was "creating music for the PC version of *Blackthorne* when I found out they needed voice-over for a CES trailer for another game they were working on. When I came into the studio, Glenn Stafford [composer at Blizzard] sat me down and showed me a 3D cinematic flying through a forest and stopping in front of an imposing castle. Glenn said, 'This is where we need to tell people about how orcs and humans are fighting'. I asked if there was a script and he told me there wasn't. Over the next few minutes I wrote up some ideas that Glenn said sounded like the game they were making, and the whole 'In the age of chaos, two factions battled for dominance…' was born." Roper came into the project



The recognisable voice that introduced each new mission was in fact the voice of Bill Roper, who ultimately created the iconic styles and words that would follow the franchise.

**THERE WAS DEFINITELY A LOT RIDING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE GAME WARCRAFT WAS GOING TO DEFINE BLIZZARD AS A PUBLISHING ENTITY AS WELL AS A DEVELOPER**


Bill Roper was vice president of Blizzard North when he left in 2003.




# THE WAR OF THE RTS

## How Westwood and Blizzard gave birth to a genre through competition

**THERE'S NO DENYING** that it was Westwood with *Dune II* that should be credited with creating the RTS that we now know of today, but Blizzard did beat its rival developer to the punch with *Warcraft* – pipping *Command & Conquer* to the post by a matter of months. Both games brought their own inventive gameplay mechanics to the genre that, later, both would utliise in their own games. The suddenness of the two games and their equal quality, however, instigated a battle between the two developers as they leap-frogged each other's RTS releases, one following the other with more innovation and improvements to the fledgling genre. This competition meant the quality level was insanely high, and as more and more developers began to enter the genre it quickly boomed with a flood of incredible RTS games.

# VICTORY FOR THE HORDE

## How the realisation that Warcraft was a success affected Blizzard…

**"WE WERE ALL** excited and honestly shocked at how well the game was doing, and it really fired us up to do more," Bill Roper tells us. "It probably meant more to Allan Adham, Mike Morhaime, Frank Pearce and the rest of the guys who has been there since day one. As with so many start-ups, they went through a tough period of funding the company off of their own credit cards and being on the edge of collapse, and while they had already successfully weathered that and had sold the company, this was a huge vindication that their vision for the company and gaming was what people wanted."







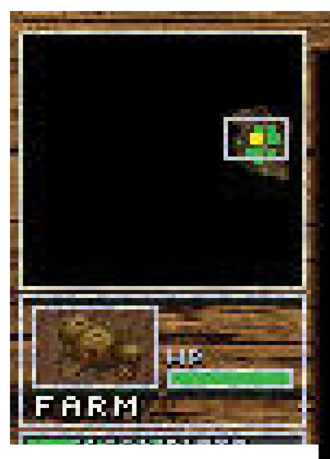
■ The fog of war was perhaps *Warcraft*'s greatest addition that would go on to become an important part of the genre. It's inclusion was to make exploring the world feel compelling.

shortly after development on Blizzard's RTS title had begun, at a point where the core gameplay mechanics and design decisions had been nailed down. The concept was rather simple: utilise the real-time strategic elements of *Herzog Zwei* or *Dune II* and enhance that experience by bringing in a more detailed story and characters alongside an integral addition of multiplayer. Blizzard sought to simplify the newborn real-time strategy genre for something more appealing – and most importantly, playable – by a much wider audience.

The first task was to create a setting that would be immediately accessible to such a broad audience, and in that sense the decision was an easy one for Blizzard. "Fantasy translates so well across cultures and genders," says Roper of Blizzard's initial decision to set its game in a dark fantasy world. "And you can do so much in terms of both storytelling and gameplay mechanics when you have mortal man battling against monsters and magic." That wasn't the sole reason for the decision, however, with Roper pointing out that RTS games at the time – of which there had not been many – were revolving around a completely different setting. "The other RTS games we were seeing in the market were focused on futuristic technology, so this let us stand apart from them in terms of our setting," he adds, silently alluding to the likes of *Command & Conquer*, the RTS competitor that would lead to an amicable rivalry between its developer Westwood Studios and Blizzard.

It was this approach to storytelling, in fact, that helped to bring in elements of the game's design that would come to define many RTS games after that, from the two playable factions with distinctly different units, the use of more powerful hero characters and even the addition of missions that didn't utilise the typical base-building mechanic. These 'guerrilla missions' – as they would come to be known – provided a handful of units and required players to navigate a map without the potential of overcompensating with a mass army of units. This, too, was introduced to help enhance the game's story, we're told. "We worked on how to tie game mechanics into the overarching storyline," explains Roper, "sometimes by making pretty drastic changes to how the game was played. For example, it was common to have missions based on destroying the enemy base, but we took that mechanic and flipped it to have mission success depend on repairing buildings. We wanted to drive emotional engagement with the characters in the story by having the player not just attack buildings, but actually have to eliminate or protect a named individual. I also think the fog of war feature that we introduced helped make the world feel more alive since you had to actually explore the map, giving you a better sense of being connected to what was happening as you felt a sense of revelation."

This drive for storytelling was also the reason behind the two playable factions, but here – with a typically fantastical setting – there was the chance for something rather original. "I wanted the player to experience the game from two radically different perspectives," says Roper, who adds that the decision to have two distinct factions was actually decided upon before he joined the company. "Traditionally the humans would have been the 'good guys' and the orcs the 'evil guys'. I always believe that any villain is the hero of his own story, and I was afforded a real chance to look at the orcs as a fully realised race and not just monsters to be defeated.




One aspect of RTS gaming that was quickly dropped after the original was the requirement of building roads to connect certain structures.



## WHAT THEY SAID…




[Multiplayer] is where Warcraft really comes alive! Fast-paced, fun and flexible enough to support a wide variety of tactics, Warcraft ranks up there with such classic two-player slug-fests as Command HQ and Global Conquest

**Computer Gaming World 1995**

The idea of orcs as a noble race was something my college roommate – Happy Jack's RPG Podcast host Stu Venable – and I in played with in our gaming group. For *Warcraft*, I wanted both sides to be as compelling in terms of character and story as they were to play, so there was twice as much background and world building to do."

**THE IDEA OF ORCS AS A NOBLE RACE WAS SOMETHING MY COLLEGE ROOMMATE AND I PLAYED WITH IN OUR GAMING GROUP. FOR WARCRAFT, I WANTED BOTH SIDES TO BE COMPELLING**

As a result of this decision, however, there was a greater need to understand the gameplay balancing that hadn't really been experienced in the industry at that point. Multiplayer was just becoming popular and it was a huge focus for the title, but even aside from that there had to be a lot of tweaks to make the game feel fair in both single-player and online. Roper recalls the "daily" tests that company took part in to ensure there was a "constant attention to detail and balance" that would allow for the game to work as smoothly as it could. "This iterative play led to innumerable changes," he adds, "that affected both the orc and human sides. Sometimes the changes would have a cascading effect that we didn't foresee and we'd have to do a broader re-balancing across other units stats or building times or upgrade effectiveness. We would have never released the game as well balanced as it was without the team constantly playing it and really experiencing what it felt like. Spreadsheets can only take you so far."

But for as dark and serious as *Warcraft* could be, it also introduced one seemingly insignificant factor that would go on to define the company as a whole. "When Glenn and I were recording unit acknowledgements – what the units say when you select them or give them an order – I said, 'What if the units got pissed off if you kept clicking on them over and over again without telling them what to do?' Glenn started throwing out ideas, and we decided to go ahead and record a handful of these for the human units. We then brought Bob Fitch into the idea and asked if he

could code it into the game. He became part of the whole plan as we all agreed to not tell anyone about it and see if anyone would notice. Needless to say they did and it was a good enough idea that it's become a staple across all of the 'Craft' games." This sense of subtle humour came to be a big part of Blizzard's games, where a serious tone and setting was never enough to eradicate a sense of fun that should be a major part of any videogame. These 'pissed lines', in particular, became a staple for the developer, with the same elements being introduced into later games – most notably *World Of Warcraft*. The shareware and review copies of the game even featured bespoke lines that would humorously refer to the player paying for the full game or giving it a good score at review stage respectively, a teasing glimpse at the fun atmosphere surrounding Blizzard at the time.

Roper believes that this combination of humour, a high-quality storyline and equally high production values is what helped lead to *Warcraft*'s success in the end. It drew people into the world that had been crafted in a way that wasn't common in the industry, least of all in the burgeoning RTS genre. But no one at Blizzard at the time believed that this would be one of the significant aspects of the game that gamers would come to love, or "at least not to the extent that it did," suggests Roper. "We all just wanted to make a great game and I wanted to try and tell a good story that tried to make it all make sense. There wasn't anywhere near the focus or importance placed on the story for the first *Warcraft* that Chris Metzen and the numerous incredibly talented writers put into the series now. I think that I was able to plant the seed of the *Warcraft* universe and a lot of amazing folks really grew it to where it is."

This, however, is overlooking a lot of what made *Warcraft* truly a standout title. If the hand-crafted single-player campaign – replete with its unique means of storytelling through the gameplay itself – is what intrigued

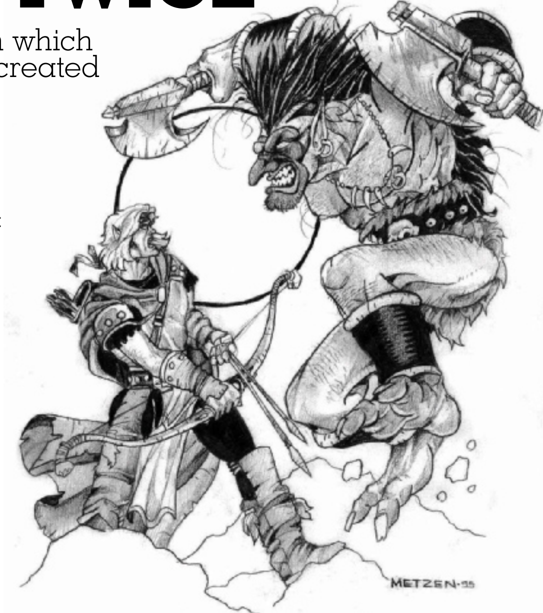



■ Like most early RTS games, a scoring system was implemented for each campaign. Part of gaming's arcade heritage, this had little relevance for gamers at the time.

# LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE

## The mystical manner in which Warcraft's sequel was created

"THE TRULY AMAZING part of all the additions with the sequel is that we accomplished all of this in a 12-month development cycle," says Roper. "I've always maintained that there was a lot of magic on that project. Not to take anything away from all of our hard work and expertise, but every decision that we made turned out to be the right one. I don't recall us ever having to throw out huge parts of the design, redo massive amounts of artwork or ever talk about delaying the game. *Warcraft II* will always feel like a magical development to me, and I've never experienced anything like it again."







## > A GAMING EVOLUTION

Warcraft > Warcraft II > Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos



The sequel a year later added better SVGA graphics, more robust multiplayer and an improved story, too.



The move to 3D was insignificant considering *Warcraft III*'s new RPG mechanics, with hero units that levelled up during a game.



**I WAS ABLE TO PLANT THE SEED OF THE WARCRAFT UNIVERSE AND A LOT OF AMAZING FOLKS REALLY GREW IT TO WHERE IT IS**

players into buying the game, it was the addition of multiplayer that kept them playing for many more hours after the campaign was complete. Multiplayer was still a relatively novel concept at the time, but with the growing introduction of modems and internet connections it was Blizzard among a select few that stood on the precipice of what would come to be an integral part of the industry. "We were definitely treading in open water with little to guide us in the realm of gaming across local area networks," says Roper. "Multiplayer gaming was common enough in terms of arcade games and consoles, but getting a game to stay synchronised across two computers was really new, and certainly to us as developers. It also made balancing the game harder because you couldn't just adjust the AI to make things easier or more difficult, you also had to take into account what people might do. Which, as anyone who plays PvP games knows, is seldom what you expect them to do. In other words, the game had to be fun whether you fought a well-thought out army of mixed units or slew of orc grunts."

With this focus in mind, it was necessary that a lot of playtesting took place to help finesse that balance. It was at this point that the team at Blizzard knew it was onto something special, not only with *Warcraft* but with the RTS genre that, at the time, had yet to properly grow into what we know of it today. "Player versus player really represented the defining moment in the game's development," Roper explains, referring to a specific point during development that led to the realisation that this was where the game needed to be heading. "I can clearly recall the gameplay session when Allan Adham and Ron Millar both came out of their offices cheering and hollering in delight at the end of one of the very first PvP games. There was a bug in the code that put the game out of sync and hilariously they both won the match – hence the dual celebration – but it showed us how powerful knowing you were playing against someone and not just the computer was." This wasn't just a defining moment for *Warcraft*, Roper adds, but for Blizzard as a company. "Multiplayer became a vital component on every project in the company from that point forward. I don't believe the multiplayer innovations we made with the *Warcraft* and *StarCraft* series, much less Battle.net or *World Of Warcraft*, would have ever been created without that initial revelation."

But multiplayer was still such a new idea. *Warcraft* predates Battle.net, the online service that Blizzard now utilises across all its games, and there was a lot to discover when it came to networking – it was all so new to everyone in the industry, Blizzard included. "It was absolutely a learning experience," admits Roper. "It showed us all kinds of flaws with our units, gave us great




■ The original RTS game was a much slower game than the games that followed. After the release of C&C, *Warcraft* needed to be quicker and more arcadey.







It's so addictive, it belongs on the FDA's controlled-substance list with Civilization and SimCity 2000. If you like action, strategy, or fantasy games, check out Warcraft. It doesn't get much better than this, folks

**PC Gamer, 1997**

insights into balance issues, and most importantly, helped us dial in the fun factors of the game. Also, some of the tactics that we saw the development team use against each other became great AI routines for the computer to use against players."

The addition of multiplayer went on to become a huge success for *Warcraft*, drawing in thousands of players into this new and innovative way of playing games and, ultimately, led to the RTS boom that would come in the years that followed. But, Roper adds, there was never a direct decision to make the genre "popular", more to "refine" the early examples in a way that could – and would – appeal to as broad an audience of gamers as possible. "I don't know if the exact idea of making it popular was in our minds – it was more refined in a way. Allan Adham used to draw two concentric circles on a piece of paper, and he'd say, 'The middle of the donut – the hole – represents our core gamers. We have to make sure the game appeals to them. But this bigger part of the donut – the actual donut, if you will – is everyone else who likes games. We can't do anything that would exclude those players'. That was the philosophy we all followed, which translated into 'Easy to learn, difficult to master'. It also guided us to not get too clever with naming units, using well-established genres like fantasy and sci-fi, and gave us a real focus in terms of taking any game type and always asking: 'Can we make this easier for someone to get into?'"

This understanding of accessibility would come to define Blizzard as a developer, and whether it is *World Of Warcraft*, *Hearthstone* or – more recently – *Overwatch*, it has always attempted to develop games with as few boundaries and restrictions as possible. This was a concept born with *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* and, following its release in 1994, the unfounded popularity of the title proved that this value ought become a deep-seeded part of company. From then on Blizzard has strived to three core ideals: high production values, broad accessibility and a touch of fun and humour. When Roper suggested that there was a lot riding on *Warcraft*, it's doubtful that he – or anyone at Blizzard – could have predicted just how much of an impact the game would have, whether that be for multiplayer gaming, the RTS genre or, it seems, even Blizzard itself.



RETRO

INTERVIEW

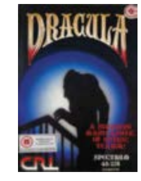
# CLEM CHAMBERS

As founder of London-based CRL Group, Clem Chambers was at the forefront of the Eighties software explosion in the UK. **games™** sat down with today's financial wizard to find out more

## SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



**Tau Ceti (1985)**
Producer




**Dracula (1986)**
Producer/
Media stirrer




**Cyborg (1987)**
Producer

**When did computers and videogames first grab you?**
It was at the science museum. They had a guess the animal Eliza program running on a terminal. It wasn't often working, but it was the first thing I headed to whenever I went there. You had to let the computer guess what animal you were thinking of. All it took was that screen and a cursor and I was hooked. These were the days of the first digital watches and calculators – anything digital was fascinating.

**Your father gave you £10,000 to start up in business - did you start in the games industry immediately?**
No, I did some other things and was down to £2,500 when I started CRL. But originally it wasn't for software. You often rented TVs in those days, so I figured why not an expensive computer? However, Atlantic Computing had sewn up the market. But I wasn't nervous about it all. There was no such thing as a 'start up' back then. You started a business and you likely failed; you couldn't be shy you just had to give it a go.

**Around the same period you also began writing for *Popular Computing Weekly* and *Your Computer*?**
I just wrote them on a typewriter, sent them in and hoped. I think they were always

**AS SOON AS IT LOADED UP I SAW A GAME THAT WAS VERY UNIQUE, AND HAD COOL VECTOR GRAPHICS**

hungry for content, but it was very laborious. I wrote programming articles and fiction, which I kind of enjoyed. It was mainly to achieve a goal of being published and paid, so it was a means to an end. Like a work-out you do to be fit, rather than enjoy.

**With hardware rental not working out, you moved to software. What actually was your first ever game?**
A nice fruit machine sim called *Jackpot*. It sold 20,000 copies at £4.95 a pop and probably made £30,000 profit. But even then it showed me that you could never guess what would be a hit. It was written in BASIC and could not have been simpler. Some of my best games never sold and the opposite was also true. *Jackpot* was one of a batch of six – another standout was *Test Match* as it went to number one in a leading computer store of the time. A lot of games only sold 2-3000 copies, the big issue being how to makes games and stay in business. You tried your best to make a hit and had a few misses along the way. Games had a six-week life, like a pop single. The best way was to fire and forget.






## PAUL STODDART
### CRL PROGRAMMER

"Back then Clem was very active, you could say hyper, and really hands-on and excited about computer games. He was always pushing for the programmers to find new techniques for getting more graphics data into machines. Very smart guy, and he predicted things like jpeg compression where images or data could be reduced by a high margin using powerful maths."

### Where were you based?

I got the cheapest office I could find in London, 240 Whitechapel Road, a stone's throw from the Kray brothers' old home. It was over a clothes shop called Davis, which was on a slight tilt after a bomb had blown off the rear off it during World War II! We later moved to King's Yard, Stratford.

### How did CRL's relationship with programmer Pete Cooke begin?

He sent in a game called *Juggernaut*. It came on cassette with a very short note in small and meticulous handwriting. I intuitively expected it to be a good game; long, descriptive letters generally contained abysmal games. As soon as it loaded up I saw a game that was very unique, and had cool vector graphics. As a game about manoeuvring a lorry, it was by definition quirky, and I wanted it. I called him, and sent him a terribly brief contract, which was simple and fair and that was it.

### CRL also tried out a few licenses with various degrees of success.

The film rights to *Blade Runner* were all over the place, so we got the rights to the music instead. It was all a bit dodgy, but we got them from a company called Rocksoft who were trying to pioneer music licensing in games. We also worked on a licence for *War Of The Worlds* and the rights holders to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* approached us as they were impressed with our work on that. The *Rocky* people were fun and we got to forge some good relationships such as Richard O'Brien and ZTT. Sounds nice now, but it was actually all about pizza, cashflow problems and coding death marches.




An early advert for CRL dubbed them the 'Dream Sellers'.

### Why didn't you do more licenced games?

Good point. I think Ocean's saturation of that market had some effect. We had others that never made it out, but a lot of our games were freelance and that's hard to couple with a licence. Meanwhile, the in-house product was hard to get out.

### Perhaps CRL's biggest and most well-known game was Pete Cooke's space adventure, *Tau Ceti*. Was that your idea?

No – my tack was to always let the talent get on with it. Pete had got these flying saucers moving around and that was where he was going to take his next game. It looked cool and spooky, and something that was going to be awesome… or nothing at all. You couldn't make payroll with demos, but you hope some will become great games. *Tau Ceti* was a great game; Pete was great, a real deliverer. He was clearly very talented; the game had it all. You could say it just didn't look possible on the Spectrum. But the bloody stupid box we put it in was a disaster, a pentagonal card box that crushed and mangled easily. It was all alchemy, so you can expect to splash acid on something and we did 20,000 units of *Tau Ceti* on launch. I think we shipped 35,000 in total, and did fat royalties, 20 per cent of what we received as we didn't do big advances. We might pop £2000 over for a game but we never went five figures. The key was to get *Tau Ceti* out for Christmas and get great reviews. It hit all the marks.

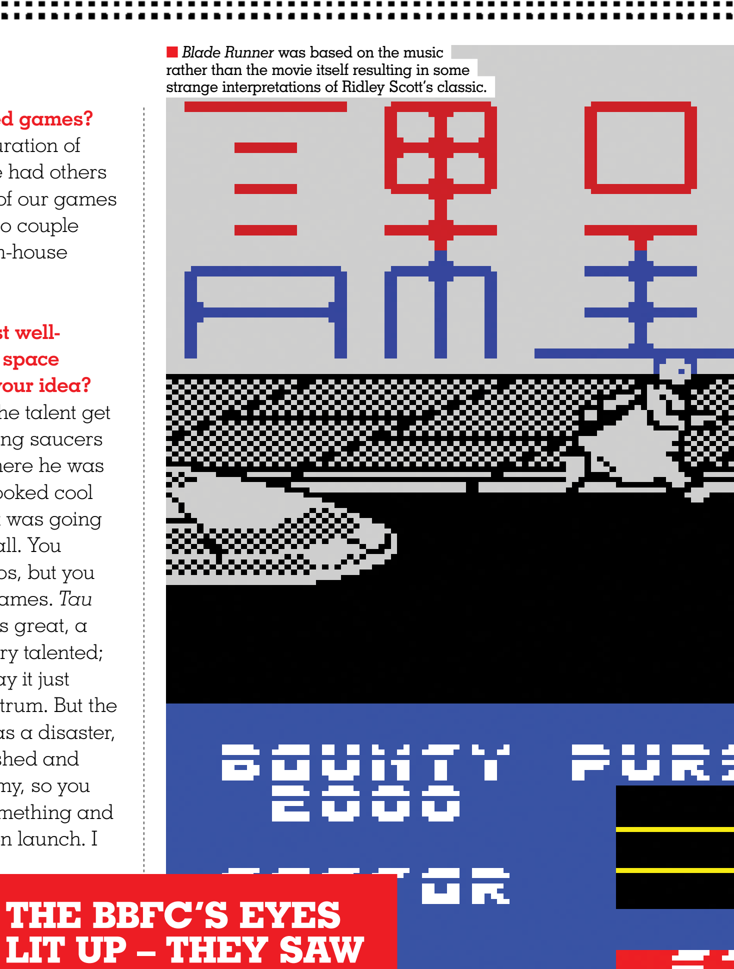
### CRL courted controversy with its range of graphic horror adventures, the first games to obtain BBFC ratings. How did these come about?

Rod [Pike] sent in *Dracula* and I loaded it up, but adventure games were dying by 1986. I could have signed tons of them. Only Level 9 had a business in them on the Spectrum and that was dying too. However, I thought horror could work so I told Rod we needed graphics and I would spice it up with the first computer game rating and we gave it a go.

### So it was a marketing ploy?

Absolutely, 100%. I had read an article in a newspaper about the video nasty bill. Some bright spark had added a computer game clause so I thought, excellent, that's a reason to do one; the media will go mad, and we'll get a million pounds' worth of advertising. The BBFC's eyes lit up – they saw a whole new business model. We pushed for an 18 certificate, but they refused, saying 15 was all they could give us as the graphics weren't animated. So in the next game we made sure it had that. Moral panic is the most pathetic of media phenomena and it should be lampooned. I think we did that pretty well.

**THE BBFC'S EYES LIT UP – THEY SAW A WHOLE NEW BUSINESS MODEL**



*Blade Runner* was based on the music rather than the movie itself resulting in some strange interpretations of Ridley Scott's classic.

### What was the Zen Room?

It was a place in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and the name of our in-house development department. It was full of kids eating pizza and writing games. I was a kid too, and it was a lot of fun, but easy to forget the kind of stress we were all under.

### Games magazines were very important in the Eighties. Which ones did you have the best relationships with?

I was too much of a nerd back then to understand that advertising budget meant good reviews. I wasn't really the same age group as the publishers, who were in their thirties, so we had nothing in common. This hurt us. We used to get good coverage a month or two before a mag went bust and now I realise it was their last gasp hope of an advertiser.

### Did you struggle with the move to 16-bit?

We always struggled, 8-bit or otherwise. Everyone was on the road to bankruptcy,








The Commodore 64 game *Cyborg* was one of the first to feature a black hero.

only some took a longer route than others. We didn't do brilliantly on 16-bit but we had a couple of nice games. By the time they came along, however, we were holed under the waterline by the Electronic Arts fiasco.

**Could you elaborate more on that?**
No, except I will say there were a lot of shoddy people in the games business back then, but I don't believe in raking over old muck. But in June 1988 we had to make most of the development staff redundant as EA held back payments. We continued trading for a year or two after that. They paid out in the end, but it was too late for CRL.

**What was next for you?**
I formed On-Line PLC with Mike Hodges. We pioneered the use of multimedia CDs and also MMO games. *Federation II* was the main one and I had a lot of success in the US. We ran *MUD II*, *Federation II* and *Air Warrior*, as well as others, in the United Kingdom under On-Line.

**You have also written several novels, some of them themed around the Eighties software industry.**
I actually wrote those back in the Eighties, but I didn't bother getting them published then because after a couple of years, what was in effect predicting the future was happening or had happened, making them obsolete as near-future SF stories. But now they are retro, so relevant again. That is both funny and ironic. Today I also run ADVFN, Europe's largest stocks and shares website, and have written new thrillers such as *The Armageddon Trade* and *The Twain Maxim*.

**Do you have any regrets, or wish you'd done anything differently?**
As a stock market guru I can tell you, if you could see the future for even 30 seconds ahead, you could be the richest man in the world. You cannot see the future with any clarity beyond catching a tennis ball. If you can't lament missing Apple at $1 a share, you can't regret more complicated decisions… and no, I don't regret missing Apple at $1 a share, even if it's $200 now.

**How is the games industry different today from the Eighties?**
It requires a thousand times more money and sells a thousand times the volume. It's mainstream; it wasn't when I was doing it. It wasn't even an industry when I started. What stands out to me now is the graphics. They are amazing. Personally, I don't need graphics to love a game, but looking at the art of some modern games, I take my hat off to the artists behind them. With or without gameplay, the graphics on many games are just stellar.

*StarCraft* was almost spun out into a third-person shooter, *StarCraft: Ghost*, though it was ultimately cancelled. It took Blizzard 12 years to actually confirm that it was officially dead

GAME CHANGERS

# STARCRAFT

**Released:** 31 March 1998 **Publisher:** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer:** In-house **System:** PC

## Remembering the defining game of its genre, the standard by which all RTS games are measured and judged

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT HAS a habit of cancelling games it isn't convinced will meet its notoriously high benchmark for quality; content to take a financial hit if it means the studio can preserve its sterling reputation. In a sense it's lucky we received *StarCraft* at all – even if it is difficult to imagine what state the real-time strategy genre and the global eSports scene would be in today without it.

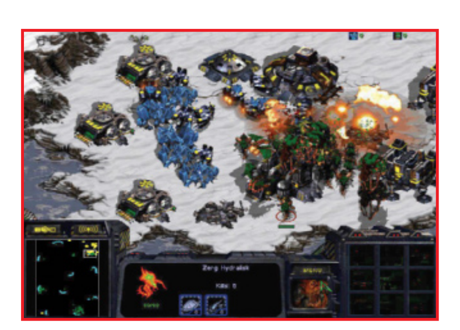
"*Warcraft* in space" was the phrase RTS fans used to belittle the game, following its initial reveal at E3 1996. The masses bit back at the lacklustre 2D graphics, limited unit variety and primitive looking gameplay – built upon the rickety *Warcraft II* engine – derisively writing off the project before it was even given a chance. But instead of ditching the project, Blizzard took the criticism in its stride and went back to the drawing board. It engineered a new graphical style, re-built the engine, introduced a fully-fledged single-player campaign and went wild with the faction and unit variety. Funnily enough, when *StarCraft* eventually landed two years later, it changed the RTS forever.

In 1998, the world hadn't seen anything quite like *StarCraft*. An entirely new IP, set in deep space during the 26th century, full of character and personality, it was strikingly different to Blizzard's own *Warcraft II: Tides Of Darkness* and far more futuristic than Westwood's *Command & Conquer*. After the title shipped a million copies in little over three months, the phrase "*Warcraft* in space" was no longer used to belittle the game, but celebrate it. It was a genius move on Blizzard's part, taking the fine-tuned gameplay it had iterated over across *Warcraft II*'s development and expanding upon it, using its skill and expertise to create something new in the process.

*StarCraft* was no longer a mere clone in a space suit; it had taken on a life of its own during the protracted

# INTRODUCING THE FACTIONS

AT THE HEART OF STARCRAFT IS AN INTRICATE BALANCING ACT



## ZERG

★ The Zerg are a feral faction that initially seems the weakest. That is, of course, part of their charm. While individually weak, Zerg can easily overwhelm other factions with superior numbers. Unit prices are cheap and so the tactic is to build huge armies.



## PROTOSS

★ A race of strange aliens, the Protoss has strength in small numbers, utilising immense firepower to overcome its enemies. That power is ultimately mitigated by high individual unit cost, though we'd wager that's the price of utilising psionic powers and advanced tech.



## TERRAN

★ The Terran are a human faction that occupy the middle ground. While a great introductory faction, they can also handle themselves fine at a competitive level in the right hands, their superior firepower and movable structures are a huge boon in difficult battles.

development cycle. Before its release, RTS games typically featured just two opposing factions, units were often shared and – despite offering some space for tactical ingenuity and strategic depth in armies – opportunities for inventive play were ultimately limited. It sounds like a small shift now, but Blizzard's ability to introduce three almost perfectly balanced factions was something of an electrifying system shock to the RTS.

There were no shared units between the Terran, Zerg and Protoss factions. Each offered an entirely unique style of play, demanding different tactical approaches to conflicts and lightning-fast counter-measures to battle back against incoming forces. No faction had an advantage over another and it was that perfect balance that helped solidify *StarCraft* as the legendary title it is today. Blizzard found a way of imbuing each with subtle shifts in strategic play; it managed to ensure early combat units were still viable towards the end game and designed *everything* in such a way that almost any army composition was viable so long as the player had the skill and patience to push it through.

**IT'S A TESTAMENT TO STARCRAFT'S DESIGN THAT IT'S STILL PLAYED AND ENJOYED AT A COMPETITIVE LEVEL TODAY, TWO DECADES LATER**

## KEY FACTS

- *StarCraft* is one of the best-selling PC games of all time, with over 9.5 million copies sold worldwide, which ultimately helped to popularise Blizzard's own Battle.net online multiplayer service in the process.

- *StarCraft* became so popular in South Korea that it was largely considered to be the country's national sport, with professional players able to carve out six figure salaries and careers from playing in tournaments.

■■■ Blizzard later introduced an expansion, *Brood War*, which introduced even more units into the game's structure without disrupting its delicate balance. That speaks to the incredible foundation that Blizzard built here, as an RTS *StarCraft*'s core design is masterful. Players are still struggling to find a perfect tactical play and every year seems to reveal yet another layer.

In today's age of instant patches and immediate feedback, it might be difficult to imagine why balance would be so celebrated. But in 1998 it was fundamental to *StarCraft*'s success. The balance between the three factions, between the base spacing in the maps and the positioning of the lanes ultimately propelled the game into heights of popularity no RTS had experienced before it.

Battle.net may have launched with *Diablo*, but it realised its purpose in *StarCraft*, with Blizzard's free, online matchmaking service becoming an integral piece of the puzzle. *StarCraft* had a notoriously high skill ceiling; its battles were fast and ferocious and that spanned a multiplayer phenomenon. The service's worldwide ranking system gave (arguably) birth to the eSport infrastructure we enjoy today, with millions of fans engaging in tournaments across the world – impressive cash prizes were introduced, not to mention professional leagues where elite players were able to carve out careers playing the game they loved so much.

It's a testament to *StarCraft*'s design that it's still played and enjoyed at a competitive level today, two decades later. The simple to learn – but difficult to master – gameplay, strategic depth and superbly designed factions mean that *StarCraft* is still the standard by which all RTS games are ultimately judged. The genre has come far in the years since, but there's still a magical quality to the original title that even its own sequel failed to capture. It's the epitome of a game changer, the real-time strategy genre simply wouldn't be the same without *StarCraft*.

GAME CHANGERS

# EIGHT OF THE BEST RTS GAMES

## THE STRATEGY MASTERS THAT HAVE HELPED TO SHAPE THE GENRE AND MAKE IT ONE OF THE MOST ADDICTIVE IN THE INDUSTRY




### STARCRAFT: BROOD WAR

■ Perhaps this goes without saying, but of course *StarCraft* is still considered to be one of the best RTS games ever made. But it's the expansion that steals our heart and has established itself on the competitive scene still to this day, as *Brood War* introduced an expanded campaign, extra units and improvements to the score and graphical tiling. It's a legitimate classic.



### TOTAL ANNIHILATION

■ The first RTS game to feature actually 3D rendered units and structures, *Total Annihilation* released in 1997 and largely impressed genre fans thanks to its impressive visuals and focus on huge battles. Developer Cavedog Entertainment also introduced the general idea of macro-management over micro, as well as a streamlined user interface that would set the general standard in the years that would soon follow.



## WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS

■ *Warcraft II* was very, very good. So good, in fact, that fans had little confidence that the sequel, *Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos*, could ever match it — were they wrong or what? *Reign Of Chaos* was not only a sizzling RTS game, establishing the beloved *Warcraft* lore and characters ahead of its transition to MMO, but it also spawned a huge modding community, eventually leading to the creation of the MOBA genre.




## DUNE II

■ *Dune II: Battle For Arrakis* is a hugely important game in the history of the RTS. It put developer Westwood Studios on the map, spurring the company to stay in near constant competition with Blizzard through the Nineties over control of the RTS market. While simplistic by today's standards, it was the first of its kind, establishing many of the core concepts and mechanics of the genre.



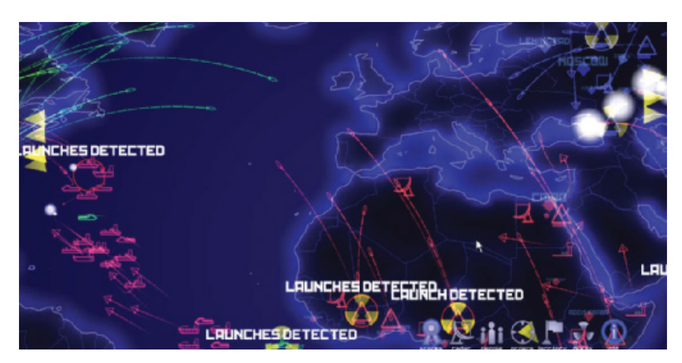
## COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT

■ Westwood's *Command & Conquer* series was Blizzard's major competition back in 1995, becoming the most popular RTS of its time, though it is *Red Alert* that is still fondly remembered to this day. Praised for its UI and deep underlying systems, it allowed players to queue commands, create unit groups and control numerous units at the same time – revolutionary, essentially. Its strong sense of personality and humour still shines through, *Red Alert* is an RTS with soul.



## COMPANY OF HEROES

■ There's a good reason *Company Of Heroes* spent many years as the highest rated RTS game of all time, because it is bloody excellent. Relic Entertainment captured the essence and violent drama of the WWII within *Company Of Heroes*, showcasing excellence in single and multiplayer design. From its units full of character and personality, to its intricate battles of attrition, *Company Of Heroes* is a modern classic.




## DEFCON: EVERYBODY DIES

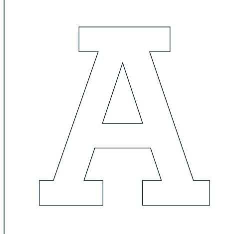
■ *DEFCON* actually knew what it wanted to be and developer Introversion Software executed upon its vision *perfectly*. It's essentially WarGames the videogame, existing as the best replication of thermonuclear war we've ever had. The simple vector graphics and gameplay only helped establish *DEFCON* from the pack, solidifying *DEFCON* as an RTS game that was easy to return to and difficult to put down.



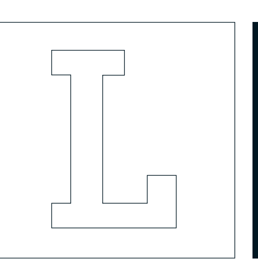
## WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR II

■ Relic's *Dawn Of War* franchise has always been on the forefront of innovation, though it's the second entry that still stands out as a modern classic of the genre. The tight rock-paper-scissors balance to its combat, the focus on small groups of units over build orders and *that* stunning single-player campaign – introducing memorable characters and a suite of RPG elements – ensure *Dawn Of War II* is still enjoyable seven years on.












# PLAYSTATION 4 PRO 1TB

MANUFACTURER: **SONY** PRICE: **£349.99**

**THE PLAYSTATION 4 PRO** is the most powerful home console on the market, and it certainly looks the part. In terms of pure construction, it's a beast of a machine; the sleek, triple-stacked, matte black finish will look impressively dominating underneath your television while the new redesigned controller will feel as comfortable in your hands as the DualShock 4 did. But none of that is really all that important, what *is*, however, is the capability of that aforementioned TV of yours.

On paper, it's a faster and more capable console, with benefits such as improved performance, graphics and improved frame-rates coming to many titles – such as *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, *The Last Of Us Remastered* and *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* – regardless of what television you own. But the console's true calling is that it has been designed to work in tandem with a 4K, HDR-enabled set, presenting an array of first and third-party games in crisp 4K resolutions.

Much of this functionality works – and in some cases is actually quite stunning – though the lineup of games currently supporting and working with the PS4 Pro don't really do it the justice it deserves. That will come later; in fact, the PS4 Pro is more of an investment for the future than anything else. The boost it provides to PSVR seems nominal right now, while the lack of a UHD Blu-ray drive is still baffling for any of those looking to enjoy ultra high-definition entertainment. Ultimately, the PS4 Pro is designed for those who want to be on the cutting edge and don't really care that there's nothing out right now that will really justify the cost of entry. It's likely that the console will truly come into its own next year, as first-party exclusives built with 4K in mind arrive, but for now the PS4 Pro is merely a luxury item.

**www.playstation.com**



# GAMING CLOTHING



## THE HERO T-SHIRT

This is another fine example of the tarot card range of shirts Gametee has been doing recently and the perfect shirt for those of us who are excited to play *Breath Of The Wild* in 2017. It's available as a print as well.
**www.gametee.co.uk**



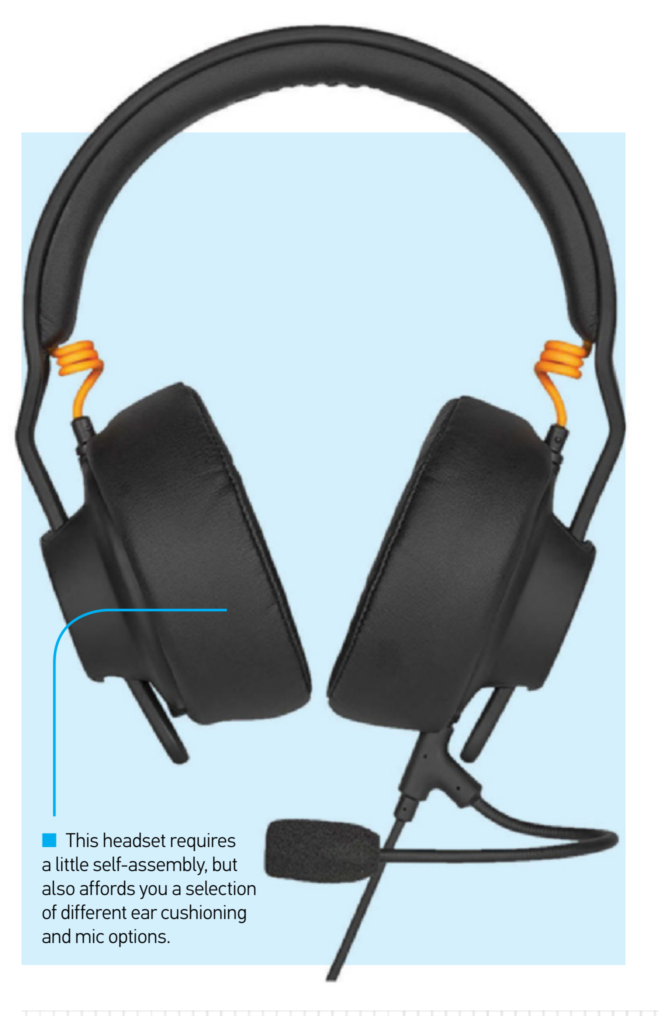

## RYAN IND. T-SHIRT

A man chooses and a slave obeys, or so the saying goes. Honestly, we don't think you have much choice but to pick up this tailored, dark heather grey T-shirt, tastefully drawing inspiration from on *BioShock*.
**www.gametee.co.uk**



## MANA T-SHIRT

One for all of you modern mages, druids, sorcerers and spellswords out there, this hyper-detailed mana tee not only looks gorgeous, but it also ships with a free collectible art card.
**www.gametee.co.uk**



This headset requires a little self-assembly, but also affords you a selection of different ear cushioning and mic options.

## FNATIC DUEL MODULAR GAMING HEADSET

SOLD BY: **FNATIC** PRICE: **€199.99**

**DESIGNED IN COLLABORATION** with Danish manufacturer AIAIAI, Fnatic's Duel headset sports a fairly interesting modular design, meaning that – not only is there some assembly required – the 'phones are fairly customisable to suit their purpose. Using the Duel on the go, it comes equipped with an 'On The Road' configuration, that essentially amounts to smaller cans, as well as an over-ear 'Gaming' configuration suited to those times you want to jump online and try to compete with the best. They aren't the most powerful headphones on the market, though you'll be surprised by the punch they are packing.

In fact, despite lacking any form of surround sound (virtual or otherwise) the Duel is more than capable of giving you an extra edge in multiplayer. The sound is balanced, though the low end has enough kick to enhance bass-heavy music or shots off from a rifle. The price might put a few off, and rightfully so, as they aren't cheap by any stretch of the imagination, though Fnatic's foray into professional quality headphones is off to a good start.
**shop.fnatic.com**

## ASTRO A50 WIRELESS GAMING HEADSET

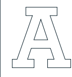
SOLD BY: **ASTRO** PRICE: **£175**

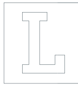
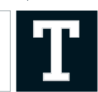
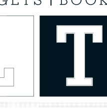
**THE PREMIUM END** of gaming headphones has become quite crowded of late, with Turtle Beach and Tritton wrestling for domination, though that has allowed Astro to swoop in and make quite a statement of intent. While the wireless A50's aren't quite perfect, they do a pretty convincing job of trying to prove otherwise. Dolby Pro Logic IIx support brings surprisingly crisp simulated 7.1 surround sound – perfect for getting the feel of any large multiplayer arena – while a versatile sound across the dynamic range ensures the A50's will complement any entertainment you might want to stick through them.

Deep, thunderous bass, solid highs and a warm, balanced mix ensures that these headphones will continue to surprise you the more time and love that you offer to them. As ever, the only complaint one might have with Astro's offering is in the design. While perfectly comfortable, they may be a little oversized for some people's liking, and the padding on the cans can have a tendency to cause discomfort on longer gaming sessions if you are unfortunate to have smaller or larger-than-average ears, such is life though, we suppose.
**www.astrogaming.co.uk**



You can guarantee that your headset is always ready to go by having it docked.



# HOW TO BE A PROFESSIONAL GAMER

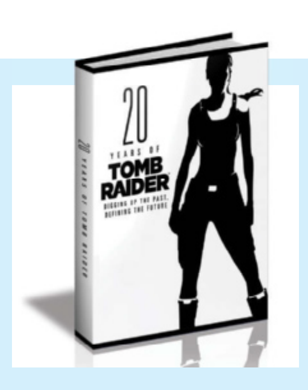
PUBLISHER: **CENTURY PUBLISHING**

**HAVE YOU EVER** wanted to become a professional gamer? Of course you have; the fame and fortune, free cans of monster and early access to videogames, who would pass up such a killer opportunity? Obviously, it isn't as easy as just picking up a gamepad and jumping into a quick match with a bunch of scrubs, it takes time, dedication and skill – sadly, in most cases, you either have it or you don't. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep working at it, trying to improve and feeling your way around the fastest growing sport on the planet.

An *eSports Guide To League Of Legends* won't instantly help you 'git gud', but it might make you reconsider the way that you play, interact with teammates or approach life-or-death situations when you're out on Summoner's Rift.

Framed around the success of Fnatic – World Champions in 2011 and ran undefeated through the 2015 regular season – *How To Be A Professional Gamer* takes you into the world of competitive gaming, offering some much-needed personality and humanity to the people behind the keyboards along the way. It's a fairly aspirational tale, each of the players has a story to tell and you might find yourself surprised by some of the trials and struggles these young professionals have faced in their quest to be the best. *How To Be A Professional Gamer* won't make you a master of *League Of Legends*, but it might just give you a newfound respect for the players that make the game so entertaining to watch.

**penguin.co.uk**



## 20 YEARS OF TOMB RAIDER

20 years of Lara Croft, we can hardly believe it either. This beautiful hardback book will take you on a journey through *Tomb Raider*'s greatest and most iconic moments, providing an in-depth look back across one of the most legendary videogame characters, through photography, interviews and exclusive artwork. A must-have for any Lara fan.

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## ASSASSIN'S CREED: OFFICIAL COLOURING BOOK

Upset that there's no new *Assassin's Creed* game this year? Yeah, we are too, but that's why we are creating our own multicoloured catastrophe! This book lets you look across intricate line drawings and grasp at the opportunity to scribble outside of the lines through 80 pages of *Assassin's Creed* adventures.

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## THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ART AND ARTIFACTS

30 years of artwork and nostalgic artefacts picked out from the archives and stuffed into one huge, beautiful hardback. From *The Legend Of Zelda* to the upcoming *Breath Of the Wild*, this is one incredible celebration of one of gaming's greatest franchises, offering a fresh look into its creation and legacy.

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**Future Publishing Ltd**
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: **www.gamestm.co.uk**
www.greatdigitalmags.com
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**Editorial**
Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
jonathan.gordon@futurenet.com
☎ 01202 586213
Art Editor **Andy Salter**
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Senior Art Editor **Stephen Williams**
Photographer **James Sheppard**

**Contributors**
Luke Albigés Adam Barnes, Vikki Blake, Callie Green, Ross Hamilton, Steve Holmes, Darran Jones, Graeme Mason, Dominic Reseigh-Lincoln, John Robertson, Drew Sleep, Paul Walker-Emig, Hannah Westlake

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**Circulation**
Circulation Director **Darren Pearce**
☎ 01202 586200

**Production**
Production Director **Jane Hawkins**
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**Management**
Finance & Operations Director **Marco Peroni**
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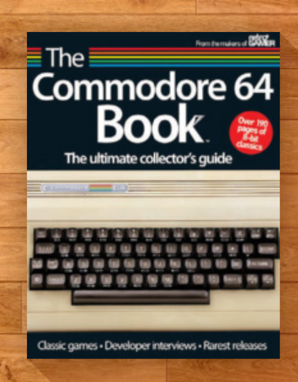
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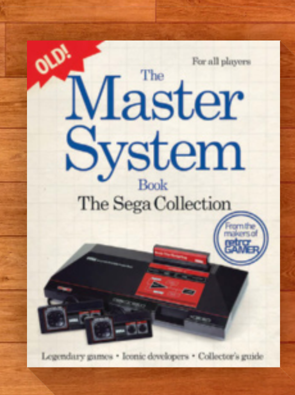
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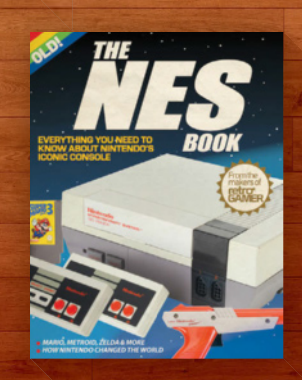


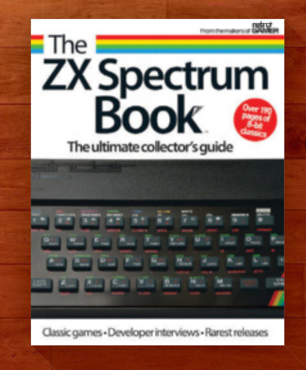

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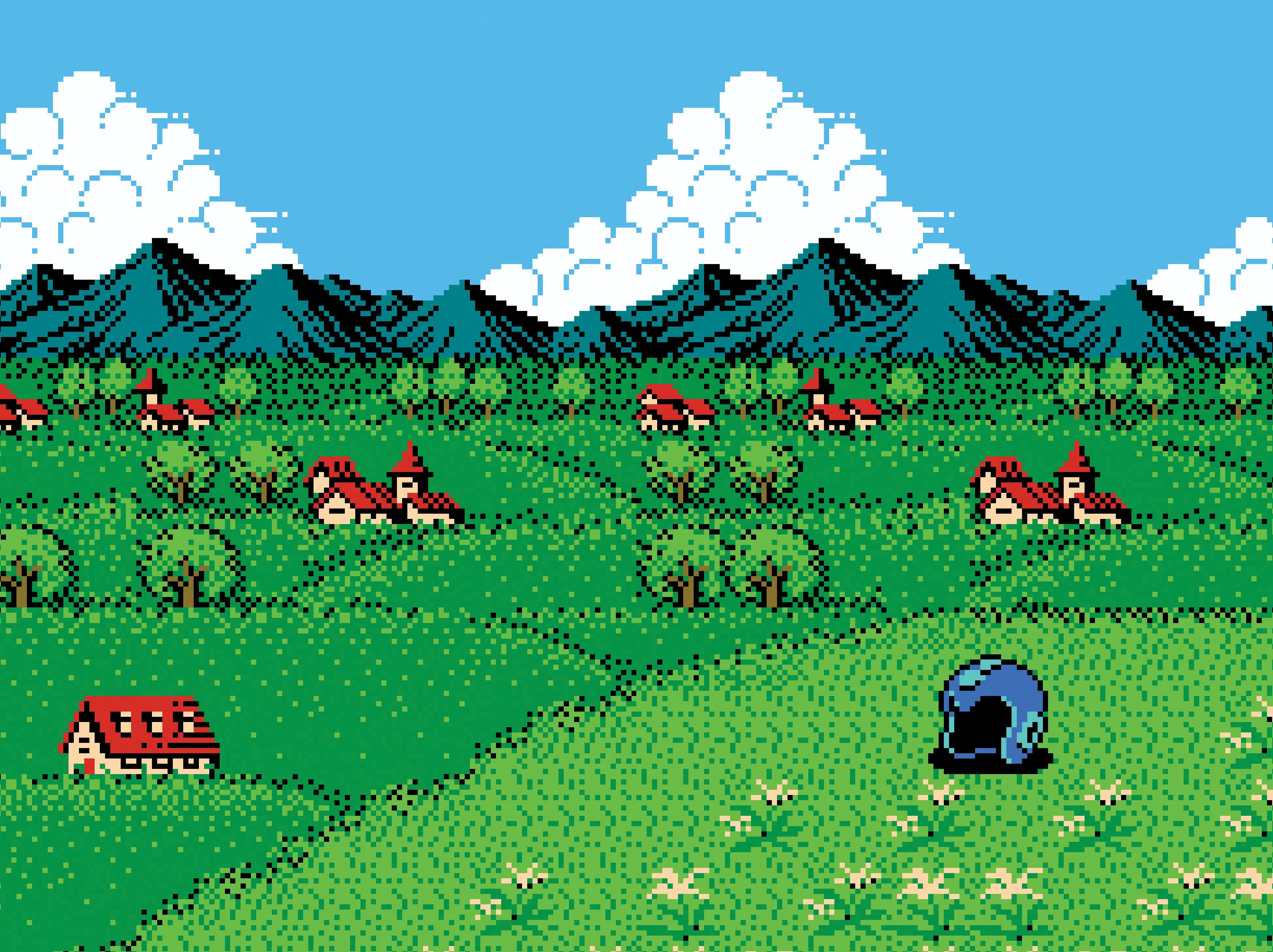

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